

THE DOCUMENTARY

a look from the inside



Al Janat

In Africa, documentaries are widely favoured for portraying contemporary societies, and at a lower cost compared to fiction. Here is an overview of the new generation of documentary filmmakers on the continent.

The question of perspective is essential for creating a story in cinema. The great films about Congo by Thierry Michel and the Great Lakes region by Jihan El Tahri belong to the past. Today, Africans are telling the immediate story of the continent through their own eyes, which has not always been the case. The lack of economic resources has hindered cinematic creativity, particularly in certain regions such as Central Africa, where the transition from film to digital in the 1980s often completely stalled the transmission of knowledge from older generations of filmmakers

to the younger ones, and the creation of cinematic works. However, a change is happening, especially thanks to the establishment of a European support system for the continent's cinemas, which encourages South-South coproductions and increases the visibility of African filmmakers on the international stage, both in fiction and documentary. Regarding the reversal of perspectives, filmmaker Thierno Souleymane Diallo summarizes it as follows: "Now the lion tells the story of the hunt instead of the hunter." His first feature-length documentary, "Au cimetière de

"A documentary follows the course of life and its uncertainties, and deadlines are difficult to control."

Pierre Barrot, Head of Audiovisual Programme at the International Organization of La Francophonie.



la pellicule", was developed with the support of the CNC's Aid for World Cinemas in 2019 and selected for the Panorama section at the 73rd Berlinale. This film covers a whole chapter of Sub-Saharan African film history by exploring the traces of a lost film from the history of Mouramani, shot in Paris in 1953 by Mamadou Touré and considered the first film directed by a Francophone African.

Diallo rightly questions the sustainability of his films: "Will my films also disappear? What means do we have to preserve African films?"



Thierno Souleymane Diallo, director of "Au Cimetière de la pellicule".

According to Eugénie Michel-Vilette, a producer of author documentaries and founder of the "Les Films du Bilboquet" production company, the lack of resources has been a constant obstacle in the history of author cinema production in Africa. "However, documentary remains the most accessible way to make movies on the continent," she explains. As an active member of the Yaoundé Film Lab, founded by her late husband Dieudonné Alaka, she has observed the important role of documentary in



« Au cimetière de la pellicule » by Thierno Souleymane Diallo

the restructuring of author cinema. "I realized that the desire to tell real stories was a springboard for directors who then want to move on to fiction."

Recalling the influence of political contexts on film creation, Eugénie Michel-Vilette notes that not all authors have the same desire or even the ability to escape reality depending on their country of origin. For example, she explains that authors from countries such as Rwanda or the Central African Republic, which have experienced genocides or civil wars, do not have the same perspectives as those from nations such as Cameroon, where the same political authority has been in place for forty years.

Subjects tackled from the inside

On a continent facing various difficulties that threaten peace and sometimes the survival of its population, while also working towards the reconstruction of its identity after its colonial past, filmmakers continue to capture the hopes, distress, anger, struggles, and daily moments of their fellow citizens.

"The African continent is now seeing the emergence of films that address subjects that would have previously been ignored by European filmmakers and can only be adequately addressed by Africans themselves," notes Pierre Barrot, head of the audiovisual programme at the International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF). For example, he cites the first documentary by Malian filmmaker Ousmane Samassekou, "Les Héritiers de la Colline" (2015), which explores the mechanisms of corruption within student unions at the University of Bamako, which are actual launching pads to power. "These films have considerable educational value regarding the social and political issues of countries and sometimes entire regions," he acknowledges.

Breaking the taboo

Documentaries are a means of freeing up discussion on taboo subjects that are rarely addressed publicly, whether they are in Africa or elsewhere. One of these subjects is illegal immigration. As part of the documentary "Vaisseau fantôme" (currently in development), Moïse Togo (Mali)

met with families waiting for news of loved ones who embarked on a risky journey between Mali and Tunisia. For his film "Le Dernier Refuge," Ousmane Samassekou set up his camera in the House of Migrants in Gao, in the northern region of Mali near the Algerian Sahara, to better understand the reasons and motivations that drive women to answer the call of the desert.

The film was produced quickly despite difficult filming conditions. Although documentaries are generally less expensive to produce than fiction films, research and filming can take a lot of time. This is reflected in the figures from the CLAP ACP co-production fund of the ACP-EU Culture programme, which has supported 16 documentaries at this stage, only four of which have been

completed so far. In this regard, Pierre Barrot emphasizes that deadlines are difficult to control and almost always inevitable because documentaries follow the ups and downs of life.

Field immersion

Many film shoots take place in countries in crisis or at war, which requires in-depth research on the ground and immersion in local communities. These conditions can be dangerous. This is the case of the film "Le Spectre de Boko Haram" by director Cyrielle Raingou. The film, which won the Golden Tiger award at the Rotterdam Film Festival in February, followed by the Paul Robeson Perspectives award at FESPACO, relates the atrocities committed by jihadist groups in the far north region of Cameroon.

The director spent more than six years on the ground, living with the locals and considering herself one of them. She chose to focus on the lives of two young children whose parents were victims of terrorism, rather than pure horror. Before this film, Cyrielle Raingou produced six documentary short films and launched the Limegbié project – "the eye of the woman" in the Bamoun language – which encourages women living in rural areas to express themselves through image production and to value their role in their community.

Restoring Haiti's forgotten memory: a rehabilitation mission

The criteria for unlocking aid from the CNC offer a chance for documentary filmmakers to obtain funding, especially for authors living in micro-states who are not eligible for European funds. This opens up opportunities for greater diversity of beneficiaries in

Le Dernier Refuge, the success of a first accomplished film back by the ACP-EU Culture programme



"Le Dernier Refuge" by Ousmane Samassekou (Mali), which addresses the issue of migration between Africa and Europe, is the first project to have been completed with the support of the ACP-EU Culture programme. To bring this story to life, the filmmaker travelled to a poorly secured region in northern Mali to film the fate of three women at the Maison des Migrants, a refuge for those on their way to Europe or in situations of return.

In this desert gateway refuge, the protagonists reveal their motivations and the reasons that drive them to take the risk of such an adventure in the desert. This co-production and funding experience was produced by Ivorian Andrey Samouté Diarra and was inspired by the memory of Ousmane Samassekou's great-uncle, who disappeared more than thirty years ago without leaving any news. The director explains: "I wanted to make a film about immigration in an intimate way because there was a family story in suspense that, for me, deserved to be questioned and explored through a cinematic approach."

Although one of the characters in the film tragically lost their life in a recent road accident, the film continues its journey in festivals and has won several awards, including the Grand Prize at the Copenhagen Documentary Film Festival, one of the top five documentary festivals in the world.

documentaries than in fiction. For the first time in thirty years, a Caribbean country – Haiti – has been granted financial aid in the form of a “bonus” from the ACP-EU Culture programme. This top-up allowed for the production of two documentaries highlighting tragic pages of Caribbean history that have been erased from memory.

The two Haitian documentaries, “Simityè Kamoken” by Rachèle Magloire and “L'oubli tue deux fois” by Pierre-Michel Jean, explore tragic events in Haiti's history. The first looks back at an attempted coup against the Duvalier dictatorship in 1964, while the second evokes the massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic in 1937, through the stories of

five characters impacted by this tragedy.

Many recent films highlight key events in African history, such as the escalation of racist violence between Mauritania and Senegal in 1989 in “Le fleuve n'est pas une frontière” by Alassane Diago, the Congolese resistance against Belgian colonization in “Procès Mbako - homme-léopard” by Jean-Michel Kibushi Ndjate Wooto, the rehabilitation of the memory of the victims of the Six-Day War in the Democratic Republic of Congo in “En Route pour le milliard” by Dieudo Hamadi, the first Congolese film officially selected at Cannes in 2020. Boubacar Sangaré, a Burkinabe filmmaker and member of the FESPACO selection committee since 2021, has also

co-directed a feature film titled “Une révolution africaine, les dix jours qui ont fait chuter Blaise Compaoré”, which uses archive footage and testimonies to revive memories. This cinematographic phenomenon shows a willingness to revisit and give a voice to African history.



Alassane Diago, film director



“Le fleuve n'est pas une frontière” by d'Alassane Diago

Support for documentary production

Africadoc: the pioneer of documentary programmes in Africa

“Africadoc” is a programme organized by the association Ardèche Images and led by Docmonde, which supports documentary filmmakers from the African continent from the writing stage to the distribution stage in twenty African countries. The numbers speak for themselves: since the program's inception in 2002 until 2020, more than one hundred films have been produced thanks to this initiative. Among them, 84 short films have been made by students as part of their training. The program has also counted more than 50 writing residencies and more than 15 co-production meetings on the territory, most of which took place in Saint-Louis, Senegal. In 2007, a Master's degree in creative documentary filmmaking was created in partnership with the Stendhal University of Grenoble within the Gaston Berger University of Saint-Louis. In 2014, the Saint-Louis Documentary Film Festival was also launched.

Between 2014 and 2016, Africadoc production, supported by the ACP Cultures+ programme of the European Union, enabled the training of 47 young producers in documentary film production. One of these young producers was Dieudonné Alaka, founder of the Yaoundé Film Lab and producer at Tara Group, who unfortunately passed away recently.

Structuring the documentary film industry in Central Africa: The case of Impala

The Impala project is an initiative of the Association of Cameroonian Documentary Filmmakers (ARDC), supported by the ACP-EU Culture programme. It brings together two workshops - Varan and Docmonde - to support the African documentary film industry in five countries in Central Africa, namely Cameroon, Congo, DR Congo, Gabon, and the Central African Republic.

The project aims to raise awareness, enable expression, and promote the development of the industry by offering a complete framework from creation to distribution, while creating a network of professional associations. The project includes four activities, namely:

- The distribution of a catalogue of 60 short films in a documentary image education programme in high schools and universities.
- The production of 10 short films to improve production quality.
- Strengthening the skills of authors and producers to meet the requirements of the international market through writing and production workshops.
- Participation in international co-production meetings to develop the network and find partners.





Or de vie by Boubacar Sangaré

"Or de vie" or the lightness of the gaze

According to Pierre Barrot, the film "Or de vie", which follows the daily life of a 16-year-old boy working on a gold mining site in Burkina Faso, succeeds in avoiding the trap of misery despite the difficult subject of child labour in the mines. The director, who himself worked in this polluted mine as a child, manages to convey the lightness of his child's view of the situation. This humane and empathetic treatment allows the viewer to identify with the character, without ever falling into pity or a distant gaze. Despite the difficult circumstances, the young teenager is endearing and radiant, offering a unique cinematic experience.

Other films also manage to deal with heavy subjects with a lightness of tone. Eugénie Michel-Villette reminds us that in African cinema, the relationship to the image is different, notably the inventive and creative use of the means available for staging and

ellipses. Violence is rarely shown in a crude manner, but rather suggested by shadows or off-screen images, due to the African film culture.

Crossed portraits between the intimate and the societal

More and more African filmmakers draw inspiration from their own experiences to depict their cultures and societies, seeking to remain faithful to reality. In her film « La Disparition », a co-production between Mauritania and Senegal, Rama Thiaw explores the collective memory of her country. "In this space that is our collective memory, I come back to the traces of my mother, drawing the portrait of a passionate and free woman," she explains. Her film, supported by the ACP-EU Culture programme, delivers a powerful message about contemporary African society.

Other female directors such as Chloé Aïcha Boro address issues of morality and politics by drawing on their own stories.



The director Chloé Aïcha Boro

Her documentary "Al Djanat" relates the impact of modern legislation, influenced by colonial legacies, on family crises. Her personal testimony sheds light on a widespread crisis in society: the death of her uncle, a patriarchal and religious figure and guarantor of the oral transmission of Islam, triggered a legal process before courts inspired by the West, thus breaking a secular tradition. Her family is not an isolated case, as evidenced by the current land crisis in West Africa, which is described as a "social bomb" by the media. This situation has led to popular protests and the destruction of the courthouse in protest against modern French-inspired justice.

Towards the emergence of a new author documentary cinema in the Central African Republic



Formation CinéBangui, shooting of "Talimbi".

Makongo Films has played an important role in the emergence of a new documentary cinema in the Central African Republic, receiving significant support for the films "Le Fardeau" and "Nous, Étudiants!"

Recently, director Elvis Sabin Ngaibino has achieved some success with his latest film entitled "Le Fardeau". The feature film features two characters, Rodrigue and Reine, who are HIV positive and must keep this information secret in a country where the disease is often seen as a divine punishment. Co-produced with the support of the ACP-UE Culture programme, the film has received the largest financial support ever granted by the CNC's Young Francophone Creation Fund for a documentary. The project involved the collaboration of two African production companies - Makongo Films (created by Elvis Sabin Ngaibino along with two other directors, Boris Lojkine and Daniele Incalcaterra) and Kiripifilms (led by Congolese Dieudo Amadi) - as well as a French company specializing in documentary production, Les films de l'œil sauvage.

"Elvis Sabin Ngaibino wants to tell the story of his country himself rather than leave this task to foreigners," explains Boris Lojkine. According to him, Central African society only produces African stories with African perspectives, as evidenced by the films in the Sango language that Ngaibino has produced - a first for the Central African film industry. "Our work is to accompany directors in creating their films because training alone is not enough. The combination of training and production is necessary to allow directors to qualify for international financing," he adds.

And the producer speaks from experience. Before creating his company, Lojkine invested in the training of young directors in the Central African Republic where the film industry was almost non-existent. Everything had to be done. Initially coming to shoot a feature film in Bangui, he took advantage of his presence in Africa to organize documentary filmmaking workshops.



Shooting of "Nous, étudiants!" in Bangui

"We were in a reality that had never been captured on screen, except very limitedly by foreign journalists. It was completely different from Paris, where it seems that everything has already been filmed. I decided to work with Daniele Incalcaterra, a member of the Varan workshops, to create training workshops in 2017 and 2018. Although the participants produced remarkable results, we realized that they had a lot to say but lacked the necessary structure to obtain international funding." This is how Makongo Films was born, named after the very first film in preparation by Elvis Sabin Ngaibino - Makongo or caterpillars in the Sango language - one of the most advanced students in the training.

Despite limited production resources, Ngaibino's film was a great success. It has been awarded several times, notably with two prizes at the Cinéma du Réel festival (Paris) in 2020.

In 2022, it was Rafiki Fariala's film « Nous, Etudiants! » that won two awards at the Cinéma du Réel festival. The project tells the story of four economics students who try to navigate between odd jobs and hopes for a better future, while denouncing the dysfunctions of the University of Bangui.

The film was presented in the official selection of the Panorama section of the 2022 Berlinale before winning numerous awards worldwide, including at FESPACO and the Venice Biennale. Although it continues to be screened at international festivals, it has recently been banned in the Central African Republic.

This second production of Makongo Films benefited from the support of the ACP-EU Culture programme through several initiatives, such as "Fonds jeune creation francophone", "Aide aux cinemas du monde", and the Berlinale's World Cinema Fund.