

Africa Day Celebrations

Чествания на Деня на Африка

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Africa Day is celebrated every year on May 25, across Africa and the world. It marks the day in 1963, when 32 African states came together to vote for the formation of the first union of African countries, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which later evolved into the African Union (AU) (Edo & Olanrewaju, 2012). The organization vowed to support the African freedom fighters and the collective resistance to colonialism, apartheid, and economic exploitation. A charter was set out which aimed to improve the living standards across member states, promoting economic and political cooperation, and greater unity among African countries (Edo & Olanrewaju, 2012). Formally known as African Freedom Day, then African Liberation Day, and now as Africa Day (HRW, 2021), this day highlights not only Africa’s continued collective struggle to eradicate all forms of colonialism, but also Africa’s identity, unity, and cultural diversity. Since 1963, Africa Day has been a world-wide celebration and an opportunity to bring people together from all ethnic groups, cultures and religions, to promote solidarity, inclusive and sustainable development, and to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of all Africans (Edo & Olanrewaju, 2012; HRW, 2021).

On May, 25, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and the National Academy of Theater and Film Arts (NATFA) “Kr. Sarafov” celebrated together Africa Day, with two special events.

The two universities, in partnership, launched the first film festival for African-Caribbean cinema in Bulgaria “The Many Faces of Africa” and inaugurated the first African-Caribbean Cultural Center, established at the Department of African Studies and Indo-Pacific Studies at the Faculty of Classical and New

Philologies (FCNP) of the Sofia University (SU) “St. Kliment Ohridski”, with the participation of NATFA.

Official greetings were presented by Prof. Dr. Stanislav Semerdzhiev, rector of NATFA; Prof. Anastas Gerdzhikov, rector of SU; Prof. Madeleine Danova, Dean of FCNP, SU; Patrick Anderson (Jamaica) and Her Excellency Ms. Zakia El Midaoui, Ambassador of Morocco.

Within the framework of the film festival, which took place from May 25 to 28, in the NATFA Hall, a rich panorama of African and Caribbean cinema was presented, as well as open cinema and filmmaking masterclasses, with guest speakers and directors from Africa and Bulgaria, Sorel Abgodemakou (Benin), Gerard Desiree Nguele (Cameroon), Dr. Susan Gitimu (Kenya), Zornitsa-Sofia (Bulgaria) and Angie Mills (South Africa).

The first day of the program started with an open masterclass, led by Dr. Susan Gitimu, a filmmaker and a lecturer at Kenyatta University, Kenya, in the Department of Communication, Media, Film and Theatre studies. Her presentation “African cinema in the 21 century: Trends, Challenges and Opportunity for Growth” offered an exhaustive historical overview of the development of African cinema. Her historical analysis started with the early development of African cinema, which was shaped by European colonialism and the postcolonial aftermath. African filmmakers had limited opportunities and resources to produce their own films during the colonial period. Until independence, films in Africa were financed, directed and distributed only by Europeans and Americans and African perspectives and narratives were largely absent or marginalized. The Western filmmakers depicted Africans as exotic and wild, lacking history or culture, and thus highlighting the differences between indigenous people and the white civilized man. Colonial cinema reinforced colonial propaganda, which served to justify “la mission civilisatrice”, the civilizing mission of colonization. Permeated by stereotypes, Africa was utilized merely as an “exotic” background for Western cinema.

It wasn't until the 1960s, after many African countries had gained independence from European colonial powers, that a wave of filmmakers emerged in countries such as Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria, who sought to create a new kind of cinema that reflected the unique experiences and perspectives of Africans. African filmmakers used film mainly as a tool for decolonization.

In the following years, African cinema began to flourish as a distinct art form exploring a variety of themes and styles. Major themes found in post-colonial films were: decolonization and independence; cultural identity and authenticity; oral tradition and storytelling, hybridity and global influences. Film making in the 21st century, according to Dr. Gitimu, has been marked by significant changes in technology, distribution, and audience engagement, which gives the opportunity to African cinema to position itself as a unique and important voice within the global filmmaking community. Her presentation also looked at current trends

in the global film industry and how they continue to shape African cinema now and in the coming years, as well as the challenges African cinema is facing in the 21st century that could potentially threaten its identity and distinctiveness.

Dr. Gitimu's masterclass was followed by Zornitsa Sofia's presentation, a Bulgarian filmmaker and artist, who shot her fourth fiction feature "Mother" in 2021, both in Bulgaria and Kenya. She outlined the story of her movie "Mother", which develops on a personal and a global level, inspired by a true story of a Bulgarian woman, who struggles to transform her trauma of not being able to have children of her own, through her work with thousands of disadvantaged children in Bulgaria and Kenya. Love, art, and creativity are the transformative forces, central to the heroine's life, that bring meaning and happiness to her and to so many orphaned children, both in Bulgaria and Kenya. The director talked about the birth of the film, the major themes that inspired her, as well as the challenges of shooting in Kenya.

Angie Mills, who led the third masterclass in the festival program, is a postgraduate lecturer at AFDA, Johannesburg, South Africa. She engages with contemporary questions around gender, race, post colonialism and film. In the South African film and television industry Angie Mills is a writer, producer and director who has realized the feature film comedies *Taka Takata* (2012) and *Down So Long* (2022). She has been a founder of the feminist film collective Women of the Sun and festival director of the Jo'burg International Film Festival and has recently launched the Films on the Bay Festival in Cape Town due for its first edition in 2024.

Her masterclass provided an overview of the South African film industry focusing specifically on various periods of nation formation, at three critical moments of disjunction in the making of South Africa: The Union of South Africa, under the National Party; post-liberation 1994 until present day; as well as under what imperatives national cinema cohered in each of these instances. She also further reflected on the inherited and continuing hybrid nature of what constitutes the film industry in contemporary South Africa, with regards to its institutions and respective films being produced. The presentation then turned to contemporary cinema and located "Down So Long", her feature film in this context in order to deliberate films of national consciousness as differently defined from films mandated to 'nation build'.

The second day of the program of the film festival continued with a masterclass led by Sorel Agbodemakou, who teaches drama and screenwriting for feature films and television series in Benin. He gave a brief overview of the development of black African cinema, focusing on the main moments that predetermined its history and development, and highlighted the differences between the three geopolitical and linguistic groups: Francophone Africa, Anglophone Africa and Lusophone Africa. He focused on the close relationship between the movement for political emancipation of African peoples, the literary current of

negritude and the birth of African cinema. After gaining political independence in 1960 Africans began to use cinema to replace the colonial gaze with their own, to construct their own vision, to define their own space, to decolonize their thinking. Thus, since the 1960s, African cinema has developed fragmentarily in time and space and in accordance with political and cultural influences from the former colonial countries. He also referred to Ousmane Sembene (Senegal), as the father of African cinema and “Borom Sarret” in 1963, as the “first African film”. The film illustrated poverty in Senegal, particularly for the working man. Other famous postcolonial film directors and movies he regarded as essential for the development of the African cinema were: Djibril Diop Mambety, (Senegal) and his movie “Touki Bouki” (1973); Youssef Chanine from Egypt, and his movie “Cairo Station” (1958), Med Hondo from Mauritania, and his movie “Soleil O” (1969); Idrissa Ouedraogo and Gaston Kabore from Burkina Faso: as well as Souleymane Cisse from Mali and his movie “Yeelen” (1987).

Gérard Désiré Nguele, the last guest-lecturer in the program, is a producer and director graduated from the prestigious French film school FEMIS, France. He teaches cinema in Cameroonian universities and schools. Currently, he is the head of the training department at the Institute for Training and Conservation of Audio-visual Heritage, IFCPA. His presentation mainly focused on the history of filmmaking in Cameroon, which gained its independence on January 1, 1960. It was in this independence movement that Cameroonian cinema was born, according to him. The first films were carried on by this wind of freedom, conveying a protest connotation. The State, seeing it as a good tool for communication and awareness, decided to develop the sector through a legal framework and above all to support it through a dedicated fund. Mr. Nguele went on analyzing the developments in the following four decades. The 1960s and 1970s were a great period of prosperity. Films that were made placed Cameroon among the leading film producers in French-speaking Black Africa, with about 250 cinemas. The early 1980s marked the arrival of Cameroonian television and the beginning of the state's withdrawal from cinema. The situation deteriorated further with the great economic crisis that Cameroon went through in the 1990s. Productions were rare. Movie theaters are closing one after another.

The development of digital technology in the early 2000s brought a cloud of hope back to life. Thanks to the digital revolution, Cameroon has seen a resurgence in film production, especially in the two anglophone areas of Cameroon, as a motion picture could be produced with relatively limited technical and financial means. He concluded with the hope that the new generation of Cameroonian filmmakers will revive cinema in Cameroon.

The masterclasses of the five guest lecturers were followed by a rich panorama of short films, full-length and documentary films from Cameroon, South Africa,

Kenya, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Costa Rica, Cuba and Colombia.

The opening of the “Many Faces of Africa” film festival was given by the world premiere of the feature film, “Destiny”, by the Cameroonian producer and director, Gerard Désiré Nguele. The film selection of the festival also included the student Oscar winner “Elalini” by director Tristan Holmes, as well as the feature films “Down so long” by Angie Mills (South Africa) and “Silence of the Butterflies” (Morocco) by Hamid Baskett, who tuned in online, for a short chat, after the film screening.

The second special event that was celebrated, as part of the Africa Day and the opening event of the “Many Faces of Africa” film festival on 25 May, was the inauguration of the first African-Caribbean Cultural Center (ACCC) in Bulgaria. Prof. Dr. Stanislav Semerdzhiev, rector of NATFA and Prof. Anastas Gerdzhikov, rector of SU offered their welcoming address for the inauguration of the center, followed by the speech of the coordinator of the center, Parick Anderson from Jamaica. Mr. Anderson briefly introduced the mission and the vision of the newly opened African-Caribbean Cultural Center, to create a mutual exchange of arts and culture between African, Caribbean and Bulgarian academic and cultural institutions. The center aims to “bring” the cultural richness and diversity of Africa and the Caribbean to the Bulgarian academic community and the general public, while showcasing Bulgarian cultural treasures to an international audience. Its objectives are related to training and academic exchange, social activities for students, promotion of cultural and educational research and creative initiatives, establishment of new partnerships and expansion of existing ones in the field of intercultural dialogue and higher education between academic institutions and other centers from the African and Caribbean countries. Africa has 55 countries, more than 1.2 billion people and over 1,000 different tribes, languages and traditions. In addition, over 20 Caribbean countries are home to 23 million African descendants whose customs and traditions are deeply connected to Africa.

The Center plans in its program a variety of cultural and academic events – film screenings, seminars with guest speakers, themed events, art, music and exhibitions related to the Caribbean Islands and the African nations.

The African-Caribbean Cultural Center was opened as part of the existing African Studies Department at the Faculty of Classical and New Philologies of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, in cooperation with the National Academy of Theater and Film Arts (NATFIZ).

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