

In Conversation:

“This is us, telling our own stories.” An African Film Festival Jubilee. *Mahen Bonetti*, Executive Director and Founder of African Film Festival, Inc., with *Françoise Bouffault*

Françoise: This is a great year for African Film Festival, Inc. [AFF]. Already, you have celebrated the seventeenth edition of the New York African Film Festival [NYAFF], you personally were awarded a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government, and the festival is being cited as one of the ten best film festivals in New York City. We have much to discuss! But first, let us start at the beginning. What was your experience with cinema as a young girl growing up in Sierra Leone?

Mahen: Sierra Leone gained its independence on April 27, 1961. My mother, Nancy Hawah Margai, and my father, Doyle Sumner, were very much involved in the first campaigns and in the early political process. To this day, they remain loved and respected by the people in Sierra Leone for what they achieved and what they did for the country. They were campaigning when I was born, and then just before independence they brought us into Freetown, to the ministers’ quarters where we lived. The first school I attended was the British army school, where I had to anglicize my name to Sophia— I had actually been christened Sophia, but everyone called me Mahen at home. In that army school, they had Saturday canteens, gave private piano and ballet lessons, and showed the British newsreel and cartoons.

I never enjoyed the cartoons I saw, because of what the characters I saw represented. We watched cartoons depicting golliwogs— you know, the puppets who scream and yell and whose hair rises up, portrayed with pink lips and a black face. They represented something like natives, and they represented them not only as underdogs, but as stupid underdogs who had no weight, no sense, no depth. At the time I could not articulate why, but still I was disturbed and offended.

So that was my introduction to the moving image, but fortunately, it did not deter me from wanting to see more films— though I still have an aversion to cartoons! As I grew older, television came to Sierra Leone and we saw films from England and America.

Françoise: How do these experiences translate into the founding of AFF?

Mahen: First of all, you know that I am not a filmmaker, and that I did not study filmmaking or cinema studies. I was interested in the medium itself, as a member of the audience. Not long after the political coup in Sierra Leone in 1967, my family came to the United States in political exile. I completed my last years of high school and went on to study at Bradford College in Massachusetts. I then came to New York and began working for Newsweek. I used to go see foreign films at lunchtime, and I always craved to go see something new. I loved the opportunity cinema gave me to be somewhere else. As soon as the lights went off, I traveled to someone else's world. I was fascinated with finding the connection, the common chord we share as human beings no matter where we are. It could be a sound, it could be a reaction to something, or the way we prepare food... I could find my commonality with someone who does not look like me, does not speak my language.

By the early 1980s, the term “African American” had become the official name used for the group of Americans of African descent. At that time in New York, there were discussions everywhere about what Africa represented, what it constituted, and the notion of who was an African. Spike Lee came on the scene, and rap music emerged. At the same time, images of Africa were becoming pervasive on TV, more than ever before— but most seemed to be images of the famine in Ethiopia. I kept thinking, what can I do? I felt so helpless.

Françoise: Why?

Mahen: It seemed that people were talking about us, and seeing images of us, but that there was no African voice present in the media's discussion. What people saw was not the Africa I knew. Indeed, the famine was a reality, but there are so many layers to that reality! It was a good thing that the famine came to the attention of the public, but even that was selectively reported. I wanted to see a more balanced view of the reality. In a way, this is what sparked the feelings that led me to found AFF, though I had not yet made the connection that film was the medium where Africans could challenge stereotypes of Africa and speak for themselves, instead of having everybody dictate to them.

At that point, I was very much focused on the music scene in New York. You must remember, it was a vibrant scene, most accessible and current. The world met here, and with much more freedom than it does today. In 1987, we started a series of parties called “African 1987” nights, as a way to bring people together. They ended up being very popular, full of eclectic people and illuminating conversations. But nothing that I was doing really addressed this feeling I had about the voice of Africa. I was racking my brain, looking for something that could be a catalyst to bring forward a bigger picture of Africa to people from all walks of life.

Françoise: And then you went to Locarno...

Mahen: Yes, it really started at the Locarno International Film Festival in the summer of 1989. I went to see *Sex, Lies, and Videotapes*, and I was sitting there flipping through the catalog when I saw the heading “Thirty Years of African Cinema.” I was stunned. I did not know that so much work had been done in African cinema! It was like a lightbulb went on: I thought, this is us, telling our own stories. No one is dictating. We come from an oral tradition, and that is our strength. Storytelling is found everywhere in Africa.

In the next hour, I found out that Silvia Voser, who also produced some films by Djibril Diop Mambety, had organized the program. I called her right away, and I met her the next day. She was very amused— I think she thought I was out of my mind. I was thirty-one years old, married for a few years, undecided about my life, wondering whether I should have a baby, my family in Africa after me, a lot of things up in the air. I told her that I thought the whole program should come to New York. Her response was to tell me that she had some books I could look at. I kept talking— I said, “It is amazing, there are some African films available in New York, but only a few.” There is a hunger for this type of programming. I need to bring it. We have a black mayor, Mayor Dinkins, and I am going to write all these letters. We are going to do it for profit, so the filmmakers can make a living. My goodness, she just kept looking at me! Finally, she said, “Maybe I can make an introduction for you, but meanwhile, look at these books.”

If I had not been so naive at the time, I probably would have thought better than to try it at all. So in a way, it is the impulsive reaction I had at Locarno that brought me to our speaking today.

Françoise: Yes, an impulsive reaction that brought you to 2010, which has been such a great year for you and AFF. Surely no one could have foreseen this in 1989...

Mahen: True! Then, we had no idea what was to come. In '89, back in New York, I started calling and writing to all the people we knew. But they were suspicious, and the filmmakers were as well. I made contact with Michel Brunet, who headed the film section in the Ministère de la Coopération et du Développement in Paris. The venues I approached in New York— MoMA, Symphony Space, the Public Theater— showed a keen interest, but they warned me: we have tried, and it is almost impossible to find prints of African films with English subtitles. It is even harder to contact the filmmakers— you might not get a response until after the program is finished. Dan Talbot of New Yorker Films said that he was continuously trying to reach diverse audiences for the African film screenings, and it was certainly a challenge. He hoped I could fare better! Screenings at that time were pulling in an audience that was about eight percent people of African descent. All this registered in my mind, but I thought, okay, we are going to change all of this. They looked at me and said, good luck!

Hilary Ney, who worked with the Coen brothers, thought it was a splendid idea and agreed to come aboard. We attended seminars, and we got a number of letters of support saying it was a viable project. We applied to be registered as a nonprofit organization.

Françoise: What about The Film Society of Lincoln Center? They have been a major venue for all the editions of the Festival.

Mahen: Yes. From the beginning, everybody thought I had a refreshing idea, but that I was out of my mind— except for Richard Peña from The Film Society of Lincoln Center. He said, we are building a theater, the Walter Reade, and we are going to need programs, so this is definitely of interest to us. Let us keep talking. He must have seen something nobody else saw. He told me not to give up.

Françoise: And what of the European support you sought?

Mahen: By the time I was supposed to meet with Michel Brunet again in Paris, I was pregnant. I went with my letters of support, convinced that they would see my determination, that they would see it as feasible. The appointment was on the third of January, and on that day I was told by my husband on the phone that my mother had died in Sierra Leone. But I was determined to go to that appointment. I went, and I poured my heart out. I was very emotional: My mother had died, I had tried but failed to find a plane connection, and I was pregnant with a child my mother would never see.

That meeting was a turning point for me. I felt that things had to succeed, that I had to make it happen. I felt the sense of nationalism, of commitment my parents had felt— I thought about the leadership they projected and implemented, and I felt that it was my turn to do something. I was not so much aiming to project Africa to other people, but rather to remind Africans that we should maintain a dialogue, to remind ourselves of who we are, so that we could determine who we were for ourselves. I think that cinema creates a space for us to discuss who we are and where we come from, much like a modern-day griot would. Cinema is our story in pictures. It is supposed to spark dialogue.

Françoise: How were you impacted by your first trip to FESPACO [the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou] in 1993?

Mahen: Oh my God! It was a totally different sensibility and feeling from Locarno. In Locarno, I was an unknown, inexperienced woman making these brave declarations: I am going to do this and that, and people will come and we will get all the support we need. But when I entered the gates of FESPACO, I found that my reputation had preceded me. All eyes were on me! We had made the selections, and I was going there to meet the filmmakers and ask them, can I count on you coming to New York? But they looked at me as if to say, you don't even speak French, you don't even come from an African country that makes films, and on top of that, you are a woman. Are you a spy? Are you some guy's mistress? They were puzzled... I think they are still puzzled.

Françoise: You must have done something right because, as I recall, you were chosen as a member of the jury for feature films in 1997, only four years later.

Mahen: I know. Quite amazing, isn't it?

Françoise: The first edition of the New York African Film Festival was held in 1993, under the banner "Modern Days, Ancient Nights: Thirty Years of African Filmmaking." You made the front page of the New York Times' arts and leisure section with an article and a beautiful photo from the film *Yeelen* displayed on the full page. Then, you went on to program sixteen more editions! You introduce new filmmakers, new films, new trends. How do you create your programs?

Mahen: For me, creating the program is like telling a story. When we start, we have to find out what exists and then try to make it cohesive. We pick a general theme that amplifies some poignant historical moment or a landmark

current event that we are celebrating, and that is relevant to African people or the Diaspora. For instance this year, thanks to the New Museum, we are showcasing new directions in African cinema through experimental short films. We also make sure the whole continent is represented, from Cairo to the Cape.

It is also very important never to underestimate the intelligence of an audience. You must be able to present not just the films that you personally like, but also the films that have unique view points, provided they are well made. I rely a lot on my intuition.

Françoise: One of the most intriguing programs of the NYAFF was the screening of the Russian archival films. How did you come upon the idea?

Mahen: Russian cinema represents the art form itself. The best film schools in the world used to be Russian: think of VGIK [the Russian State Institute of Cinematography]. There is so much information that has been documented on Africa by the former colonial masters: the French, Belgians, English, Dutch, etc. But there is nothing comparable to what is in the Russian archives.

The American filmmaker Bill Greaves had documented the First World Festival of Negro Arts, a huge celebration of African art heritage, in 1966. USAID gave him a small camera and no sound technician, but he did a marvelous black-and-white film. Still, he kept telling me to find the Russian films. He said they had brought swarms of technicians, they had filmed in color, they had used equipment that is still considered state of the art today. Other people recalled similar Russian projects, and they encouraged me to find the films. In 2007, I started corresponding with Russian filmmaker Alexander Markov, who started looking at the Russian State Documentary Film & Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk, and went crazy over what he found. He said, they have things that no one else shot: for instance, the attack on Lumumba, a piece that AFF later showed.

Maintaining access to the Russian Archive is costly for me, and it requires a great deal of effort, but after two years, the people at the Archive finally trust me. It is so important to have access to those archives. They contain poetic propaganda. The British have archives as well, but their message is something along the lines of: What do the Africans do now that they have their independence? They sing and dance as usual! Long live the Queen, and long live Africa! The footage in the Russian archives, on the other hand, seems to say: We were told that Africans had no brains, but we came and we met scientists, we met writers, we met philosophers... The others called it the

Dark Continent, but we find that the people here have so much culture. The Russians filmed beautifully, and they filmed things you do not see in the other archives. The former colonial powers just wanted to record the moment, the flags going up and down. The Russians gave the background, they traveled around the country, they showed trees fluttering, people in the fields. They show parts of Africa that had never been filmed.

Françoise: How do you find that African filmmaking intersects with global cinema? In 2004 you presented *Al'leessi... An African Actress* by Rahmatou Keïta. It was very revealing, how Africans had appropriated cinema using local traditions and how the medium had impacted local society. Moustapha Alassane even made a parody of a western in 1966 with a wonderful African flavor.

Mahen: Even though much of African cinema is attributed to the French filmmaker Jean Rouch's influence (and rightfully so), this is not the whole story. People like Moustapha Alassane, Oumarou Ganda, and later Mariama Hima were using puppeteer and animation techniques even before cinema, to tell local tales.

But yes, there has been much influence by films from other regions. When Western and Indian movies became accessible, it was as though every youngster wanted to meet an Indian princess, or they wanted to become John Wayne. Maybe only one person could afford to pay to see a certain movie, so they would come back and retell the story in their own way to the other kids, who would further elaborate and rewrite the story as their own. They had imagination. So many African filmmakers dream of making a western! Look at Mambety's *Hyenas*. Remember the atmosphere, the kind of town in the desert, the train, the woman coming back to town with all the money... and then you have Moustapha's western, where he sometimes let an unwanted giraffe stray in the background...

Françoise: Let's talk about some of AFF's achievements. First, did you succeed in bringing larger audiences to African cinema?

Mahen: In many ways we did succeed in reaching out to more people, and especially in reaching an African American audience. I do not think it was the case that earlier, African Americans had no interest in screenings of African films— I think they did not feel welcome. Now, when we bring programs to parks and schools, people appreciate the fact that we respect them, that we come to present a program that will bring something to their lives, or affirm

something they believe, or make them want to probe further even if they don't agree. Many of those park programs give audiences a total experience of drum, dance, food, needle arts, double Dutch, and of course, film.

Françoise: Yet, the value of AFF's programming is not only in the films that it screens to audiences. You also bring established and emerging filmmakers together and provide a space for interaction and exchange. They usually say the experience is very different from what they find at FESPACO. Why is that?

Mahen: We bring young promising filmmakers, who sometimes have not made more than one very short film, to present alongside stars like Souleymane Cissé, Abderrahmane Sissako, and Safi Faye. Of course, the young filmmakers are in awe, but the established filmmakers also love it because they get to see what the youth are doing. In the industry meetings that we arrange, young filmmakers ask questions and established filmmakers can share their experiences in filmmaking and distribution. Everyone learns quite a bit.

It is different at FESPACO because there, the hierarchy still exists. At FESPACO, everyone tends to stay in their own clique: The younger ones sit here, the South Africans there, the big shots there. At the New York African Film Festival, groups are small, and borders are shattered between Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone filmmakers. They all see each other's films, and they have face-to-face encounters. I bring them to my home for dinners, in an intimate setting, and it breaks the ice. They have lively discussions...

Françoise: I remember a heated argument about Sembene's *Moolaadé* at one of these famous dinners that you reference. Some filmmakers got into a huge debate about female circumcision and women's rights, right in front of Sembene, who was quietly listening. He never intervened. He seemed to relish the fact that his film could create such a commotion, especially among young African women from different parts of the continent.

Mahen: Yes, we sorely miss Sembene, and this book is also a tribute to him. And like Safi Faye and others have said, he appreciated the opportunity to have discussions at the table and enjoyed the huge philosophical debates.

Françoise: The relationships AFF has forged and the knowledge and resources you have accumulated are critical to the organization. Although few people know it, AFF is an incredible resource center.

Mahen: In fact, some people actually think we should change our name, since it does not really reflect everything we do. We continually receive calls from Hollywood and from all sorts of other sources for all sorts of requests: Where

can I buy this animal footage for my film; which filmmaker is coming through town; where can I get a crew when I hit this place; where do I get costumes that depict a certain period; how can I find people who can do a voice-over in this African language; etc. We are a resource center for all things African cinema, and by extension, African culture. We facilitate all sorts of business opportunities for our community.

Françoise: What are you particularly proud of at this point?

Mahen: I am very proud of the response we get from audiences. We show that African cinema is a cinema that appeals to a wide audience, not only to film lovers and cinephiles. We have been creating a space and an atmosphere where people really can learn and express themselves, and I love to see people coming out of the films with bright faces and listening to the discussions that take place. I am also proud of the talent that keeps coming out of our continent. I keep discovering new talents, creative and resourceful young filmmakers, many of whom are women. Their work brings audiences to another level, in terms of how they think about Africa. And of course I am proud that we showcased people like Mahamat-Saleh Haroun and Abderrahmane Sissako. They were not known to US audiences when we presented their work in the United States; they were not even big within the African community. Today Abderrahmane is revered, and Haroun received the Jury Award this year at Cannes Film Festival.

Françoise: How do you see the Through African Eyes series fitting into the work of AFF?

Mahen: I feel that the festival helps cultivate an audience. It finds a space where everyone can meet and have discussions and exchanges. We have filmmakers interact with the public, and every time the Q&A sessions continue after their formal conclusions, spilling out into the lobby. There is this hunger... People cannot get enough.

We did some research into books on African film, and we found that they tend to be targeted to scholars and academics. The intellectual discourse on African film is of course needed in the sphere of academia, but we also want there to be something available for our general audience— something that addresses people in a way that is informative without being watered down. So we let filmmakers express themselves directly, through freely flowing conversations with interviewers whom they often know and trust. We also asked scholars and other experts to write complementary essays.

The book is easy to read and accessible, but it is well done. It can be and is used in all sorts of contexts: at universities, in high schools, in community libraries, in private libraries. And we were successful: libraries and universities especially bought the first edition because it is a great introduction to African cinema. That is what encouraged us to publish a second volume.

Françoise: Do you have any other projects in the works?

Mahen: For many years, we have been working with organizations and individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially Brazil and Jamaica, and more recently, Cuba. We would like to create closer ties and perhaps a foundation for collaborative productions from filmmakers across these countries. We share a common commitment and passion.

And then, full circle, I want to go to Africa.*

* Since this interview Mahen has, in fact, gone to Africa, with AFF's first ongoing program on the continent: the Sierra Leone Cultural Conservation Program (CCP). The program was launched in March 2011 with the start of the CCP's public exhibition programs and the youth audiovisual workshop, which guides a diverse team of young artists and media makers in the documentation of Sierra Leonean culture.