

Malian Cinema

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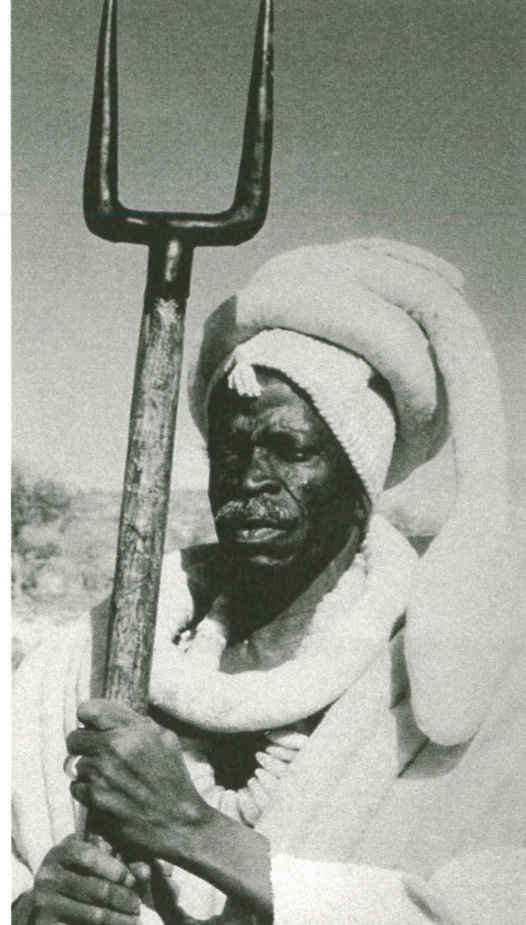
Over forty years old and with more than two hundred films of all genres in all formats, Malian cinema has occupied a central place in the cinematic landscape of Africa and the world since the 1970s. This impressive international success is to be credited to highly talented and persevering directors such as Souleymane Cissé, Cheick Oumar Sissoko, Adama Drabo, Abdoulaye Ascofaré, and Assane Kouyaté, who have won such prestigious awards as the coveted Yennenga Stallion, the Best First Feature Film as well as Jury prizes at the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) in Burkina Faso, and the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. It is also due to the genius of such gifted actors as Balla Ibrahima, Sory Koita, Hélène Maimouna Diarra, Habib Dembélé, and the late Balla Moussa Keïta.

While cinema was officially born in 1895, Malians were only able to represent themselves and their stories on the screen after their country's independence from France in 1960; French colonial policy had prevented them from doing so earlier. (Ironically, Mali was of great interest to French anthropologists, who made many of their films there during the colonial period.) Understandably, then, one of the first institutions created in the country after independence was a National Office for Cinematography (OCINAM), now referred to as the National Film Production Center (CNPC).

From its beginning, Malian cinema has been the synthesis of all the other arts in Mali. It has made a profuse use of Malian architecture by setting its locations in the most visually stunning regions of Mali: in Djenné (*Guimba*), the Dogon country (*Taafe Fanga*), and the beautiful north (*Faraw* and *Waati*). It has also made abundant use of its musical wealth, foregrounding the music of talents such as world music giants Salif Keita and Ali Farka Touré. Finally, the beautiful costume designs in Souleymane Cissé's *Waati* and Cheick Oumar Sissoko's epics *Guimba* and *La Genèse* (Genesis) have contributed as well to a unique cinematic experience of breathtaking beauty.

Malian filmmakers have also used the aesthetics of social realism to interrogate their society and engage in the most profound philosophical questions of our time. They have probed the nature of power in *Finye*, *Guimba*, and *Yeelen*; the connection between power and knowledge in *Yeelen* and *La Genèse*; and the links between gender, power, and knowledge in *Taafe Fanga*. They have problematized the notion of time in cinema, rejuvenating time-sanctioned aesthetic practices of the oral tradition by importing them into the cinema through the central presence of the *griot* and through editing, acting, and narrative styles.

Recently, Malian cinema has explored several areas that augur an interesting future. The first is animation films, as seen in the work of Mambaye Coulibaly (*La geste de Ségou*, 1989) and Kadiatou Konaté's *L'enfant terrible* (1993), which draw on Malian epics. The second is the



The legendary Balla Moussa Keita as Hamor in *La Genèse*.
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increasing popularity of television soap operas and series such as Djibril Kouyaté's "*Wahala*" (2000), Salif Traoré's "*Sida Lakari*" (2001), and Boubacar Sidibé's "*Les aventures de Séko*" (2001).

Malians abroad are increasingly using the camera to reflect on their experience of exile and diaspora, and their relationship to their home country. Of note in this area is Manthia Diawara's experimental documentary *Bamako Sigi kan* (2002). In this film, Diawara returns to Mali and captures the concerns and aspirations of Malians in this new century, ranging from conflicting views about globalization to the desire among youth for uncensored self-expression through hip-hop and *sabar*. Malian cinema thus chronicles both the regional and global influences on Malian culture as well as the impact of this culture on the globe, through its textiles, music, and photography.



In spite of its immense talent and diversity, Malian cinema faces multiple challenges in production, distribution, and exhibition. There is no film school in Mali to train the next generation of Malian film-makers. Because financial resources are scarce, the vast majority of films have to be made in co-production with other countries, primarily France—through its Ministry of Cooperation—and the European Union. There is also a dire lack of postproduction facilities. Finally, Hollywood, Bollywood, Hong Kong, and some European films fill Malian screens, making it difficult for Malians to see their own images.

Solutions to these problems are being sought at the national, continental, and international levels. Non-governmental institutions such as FEPACI (Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers), UCECAO, and AECI (filmmakers', producers', distributors', and exhibitors' associations) have taken up the challenge. The advent of digital technology is increasingly considered a means of cutting costs. The growing popular video tradition in neighboring countries is also seen as a potential model. By appointing filmmaker Cheick Oumar Sissoko as Minister of Culture, a first on the continent, the new government of Mali has manifested its commitment to the development of cinema for the joy of Malian audiences and moviegoers around the world. ■

A scene from *La Genèse* by Cheick Oumar Sissoko.

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Aoua Sangaré in Souleymane Cissé's classic *Yeelen*. Photo

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