

18th AfryKamera African Film Festival in Poland

The AfryKamera African Film Festival is an annual event that aims to promote and showcase the diversity, richness and creativity of African cinema. This paper highlights the various aspects and impacts of the festival on filmmakers, audiences and the wider cultural landscape. This year's edition ran from 12th to 17th December in Warsaw, Poland. Throughout the duration of the six-day festival, attendees had the opportunity to view a diverse selection of over 50 films, including features, documentaries and short films. The films were categorised into various subject divisions. The festival was held this year at both Kinoteka in Warsaw and, for the first time in AfryKamera's history, at the Film Culture Centre of Andrzej Wajda.

The motto of the festival in 2023–2025 is “African Gaze”, and the main theme of the 18th edition was “Woman”. As the festival organisers explained, “we will show films created by women and about women, we will support debutants and appreciate artists with longer experience. We want to loudly emphasise the roles of women in African culture and art and create a safe zone full of female energy in which we will talk about feminism, development and the power of women”. The current edition exhibited remarkable diversity in terms of the geographical origins of the works and the range of topics addressed. A curated selection of numerous productions from Senegal, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, and Cameroon were chosen.

The first key motif, “Woman”, resonated strongly with the legacy of Safi Faye (1943–2023), the pioneering Senegalese filmmaker who achieved the distinction of being the first African woman to create a feature film that was commercially marketed. She sadly passed away in 2023 in Paris, France, and was interred at her ancestral village, Faidal. The special set of films titled “One&Only: Safi Faye”, curated by Wanjiru Kinyanjui, was devoted to her notable accomplishments. Four of her films were showcased: *Kaddu Beykat* (A Letter from the Village, 1976), *Fad'jal* (Come and Work, 1979), *Man sa Yay* (I, Your Mother, 1980) and *Selbé: One Among Many* (1982). Three of them were set in her family village, Faidal, located south of Dakar, the capital city of Senegal. Kinyanjui, during the opening ceremony of the festival, expressed

the importance of Faye's work. The ancestral village of Faye, the individuals she captured on film and their perspectives hold equal significance in her films, alongside the economic, cultural and historical challenges faced by the people depicted in her films. The post-colonial struggles that Africans encounter, regardless of their location, in relation to culture, religion and economy, were applicable to numerous African nations and populations. The films of Safi Faye and many other Africa-based films are rarely shown on the African continent. The main obstacle is distribution across the continent, something that it is anticipated to worsen in the future.

The second key motif, titled "Beyond Nollywood", and curated by Nadia Denton, was dedicated to contemporary Nigerian cinematography. Denton coined the phrase "Beyond Nollywood" in 2014 to describe a novel cinematic style emerging from Nigeria. Regarding film productions, it encompassed genres such as art cinema, documentaries, animation and experimental films with a unique film style, differing from the more conventional and commercial works of Nollywood. The set included motion pictures such as: *Queer Nigerians* (which chronicles the experiences of five LGBTQ Nigerians residing in the United Kingdom as they record their lives using audio diaries; directed by Simisolaoluwa Akende, 2023); *Burkina Babes* (an homage to the resilience and variety of African women, presented through a collection of short photo essays, directed by Kagho Crowther Idhebor, 2022); *Mami Wata* (the story of a tranquil island community called Iya, where the inhabitants are content and harmonious, devoted to the worship of the sea goddess Mami Wata; directed by C.J. 'Fiery' Obasi, 2023); *Return to Chibok* (the cinematic adaptation of Helon Habila's visit to Chibok, as described in his book "The Chibok Girls", directed by Branwen Okpako, 2022). The shows were accompanied by a Q&A discussion with Branwen Okpako and Simisolaoluwa Akande, moderated by Nadia Denton. According to Denton, "the group of brave Nigerian filmmakers and women filmmakers created a new film aesthetics, that promises to be a bridge between West Africa and the rest of the world", hence the genre "Beyond Nollywood" has the potential to establish itself as one of the most significant film genres originating from the African continent.

Short films also deserve particular consideration, categorised this year into three subject groups: "Afriqueeer", "Diaspora" and "Continent". The curated collection "Afriqueeer", overseen by Miki Smoluchowski, featured pictures showcasing the broad LGBTQ+ African community. Each film explored themes of gender, love and sex from a unique perspective: *Egungun*, directed by Olive Nwosu, Nigeria, 2021); *How Not to Date While Trans* (directed by Nyala Moon, USA, 2022); *Prayers for Sweet Waters* (directed by Elijah Ndoumbe, UK, Republic of South Africa, 2021); *For Love* (directed by Joy Gharoro-

Akpojoto, UK, 2021); *Ifé* (directed by Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim, Nigeria, 2020). Conversely, the “Diaspora” collection addressed societal concerns affecting Africans from a worldwide standpoint. This collection comprises several films created in places such as the United Kingdom, Guadeloupe, Reunion, Belgium and France: *Teju’s Tale* (directed by Teniola Zara King, UK, Nigeria, 2021); *Here Ends The World We’ve Known* (directed by Anne-Sophie Nanki, Guadeloupe, 2022); *Pema* (directed by Victoria Neto, France, 2022); *Sèt Lam* (directed by Vincent Fontana, France, Reunion, 2022); *Hématome* (directed by Babetida Sadjo, Belgium, 2022). The last collection – “Continent” – was completed with productions from Rwanda (within the theme “Focus” Rwanda) and Cape Verde: *Mirror, Mirror* (directed by Sandulela Asanda, Republic of South Africa); *Sumara Maré* (directed by Samira Vera-Cruz, Cape Verde); *The Envoy of God* (directed by Amina Abdoulaye Mamani, Niger/Burkina Faso/Rwanda); *Mãe Pretinha* (directed by Patricia Silva, Cape Verde, Poland); *Bazigaga* (directed by Jo Ingabire-Moys, Rwanda/UK); *Terra Mater* (directed by Kantarama Gahigiri, Rwanda, Kenya).

Importantly, the festival served as a platform for cultural exchange, allowing filmmakers, actors, and industry professionals to present their work, share experiences, and network. Many workshops, panel discussions and Q&A sessions were organised in order to foster dialogue and collaboration between African and international filmmakers and the Polish audience. For instance, Q&A sessions were held with several prominent artists and directors of full-length fiction productions and documentaries: Cyrielle Raignou (the Cameroonian director of *The Spectre of Boko Haram*, 2023), Nisrine Benchara (the actress in *Queens*, 2022), Angela Wanjiku Wamai (the director of the Kenyan production of *Shimoni*, 2022), Merle Grimme (German director of *Clashing Differences*, 2023), Cheryl Isheja (the actress in *Mother Land*, 2023) Brenda Akele Jorde (the director of *The Homes We Carry*, 2022), Myriam U. Birara (Rwandan director of *The Bride*, 2023), Aïcha Chloé Boro (the director of *Al Djanat*, 2023), Ellie Foumbi (the director of *Our Father, the Devil*, 2021) and Babetida Sadjo (the director of *Hematoma*, 2022; actress in *Our Father, the Devil*). The festival offered a valuable educational experience for audiences by presenting films that address social, political and economic issues specific to Africa. Through thought-provoking narratives, documentaries and online or offline discussions, the festival helped raise awareness about African realities, challenges and accomplishments, contributing to a more informed and empathetic global perspective.

Significantly, the festival also showcased two Polish-produced films. The set titled “Through Polish Lens” consisted of *Blessed by Sunlight* (directed by Sebastian Karolak, UK, Kenya, and Poland) and *Singeli Movement: Greed*

for *Speed* (directed by Jan Moszumański-Kotwica, Poland, Tanzania). The first production explored the subject of albinism in Tanzania, while the second production was a documentary created in partnership with Ugandan record company Nyege Nyege Tapes. It focused on Tanzania and the electronic music genre called Singeli.

Currently, we are observing a significant change in the film industry, as there is a growing presence of African women. This transition is a subject of intrigue for scholars, film practitioners and audiences alike. An important event enabling interesting interaction with viewers was a discussion panel entitled “Unsettling the Narratives: Women, Film & Positioning of African Woman of the Future”, hosted by Dr. Ezinne Ezepeue – a lecturer on film at the University of Nigeria, where she teaches film studies, Nollywood studies, and documentary filmmaking. The panel gathered distinguished guests: Wanjiru Kinyanjui (filmmaker, writer, jury member and curator at the festival), Branwen Okpako (director of *Return to Chibok*), and the aforementioned Babetida Sadjo. According to Ezepeue, the film, a potent form of expression and impact, served as both a gratifying source of observation and a means of imparting moral guidance, shaping the identities of women. Over time, the portrayal of women in films transformed into clichés, creating a cinematic perspective that sought to confine women to predetermined positions, rather than empower them to shape their own futures. Women internalised society’s expectations and norms through movies, which reflected systematic mechanisms aimed at perpetuating their subordination. “Our panel serves as a vital convergence of African filmmakers to explore how this transformation is, in turn, shaping and impacting African women. Our discussion will cast a critical light on women in cinema, unsettle existing narratives, and interrogate anticipated future outcomes from African women reclaiming their stories and redefining their destinies”, said Ezepeue.

As is traditional, the festival featured a variety of interdisciplinary events, including dance, music, performance art and special shows for children. The festival’s ceremonial inauguration was further enhanced by the appearance of renowned vocalist Ewa Ekwa, while the workshops were offered by Aleksandra Lemba (a dancer, psychologist, facilitator of psychosocial skills workshops, the trainer of “Toward Movement” dance and movement workshop) and Kasia Sylla (a violinist, vocalist, and music educator, the trainer of “Sound Bath”). The AFreaks concert, held on December 16 in Warsaw SPATiF club, also honoured the importance of women artists. AFreaks is a format that was launched in 2022 to highlight the role of music in African cultures and traditional and contemporary art. In this year’s edition the experimental electronic musical performance was made by Shannen SP (British DJ, vocalist,

and curator), Cheryl Isheja aka Binghi (Rwandan singer, songwriter, actress, and DJ of electronic music), Polish-Nigerian singer Ifi Ude and Polish DJ Kitty Sarcasm.

The inaugural film festival in the Central and Eastern Europe region, which showcases African cinema and is the biggest event in Poland celebrating African cultures, garnered significant attention from a wide audience. It attracted a diverse group of individuals who were captivated by the intricate cultures of Africa, including members of the intellectual, artistic and diplomatic communities. The festival actively supported and promoted the work of African women filmmakers, recognising their significant contributions and highlighting their unique perspectives on various societal issues. By providing a platform for these voices to be heard, the festival contributed to the overall empowerment of women in Africa and the African Diaspora. Through film screenings, workshops, and networking events, the festival facilitates cross-cultural collaborations and encourages the sharing of experiences, ultimately enriching the global film landscape.