Expatriate African cinema is primarily made in former colonial metropolises such as London or Paris where many African directors went to acquire their training in theater or filmmaking. While most African filmmakers have chosen to return home to depict Africa at its various historical, political and social stages, others in foreign capitals record on film the plight of African emigrants who left their country in search of employment or education abroad.[1]

EXPATRIATE ARTISTS

About fifteen expatriate African directors are presently living in Paris. The problems they face match those of other African directors working in various European countries, and their shared expatriation gives them shared themes to explore and problems to face.

Unfortunately their film production is limited, hampered by lack of money. For day-to-day survival, they usually work in fields not necessarily connected with filmmaking. When they make films, they do so mostly through independent channels, so their films are not widely distributed but presented mainly in non-commercial circuits, from film festivals to university campuses. Most of these filmmakers were trained at the Paris Institute for Cinema Studies (I.D.H.E.C). Others acquired media training by working as technicians or assistant directors with French filmmakers or television stations.

One of the pioneers of African cinema, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, made his first film while he was studying at the I.D.H.E.C. in 1955. His AFRIQUE SUR SEINE (AFRICA-ON-THE SEINE) relates the alienation of African students in Paris. This twenty-minute black and white film made with very modest means testifies as a socio-historical document to Africans' life abroad and is the first example of expatriate Francophone African cinema.

In 1980 the most representative and widely known filmmaker of African cinema in exile was Mohamed Medoun Hondo, better known as Med Hondo. He had limited formal schooling. Born in Mauritania, he came to France in 1958 where he did odd jobs before studying drama. He says of his early stay in France:

"At first, I became a dock worker in the South of France. Then I worked..."
on a farm and later I got hired as a cook. All these jobs allowed me to learn a lot about the French proletariat. When I came to Paris I became a waiter. As such, I learned a lot about the French bourgeoisie just by observing them eat.\[2\]

While working, Med Hondo attended drama classes. He says of this:

"I became involved in drama because I felt a need to express myself and because I had a great deal of naïveté. As I saw actors on the stage, they reminded me of the griots and of the palaver trees under which African people debate their problems. I thought that by way of theater, I could tell what I had been enduring and what I felt. My assumptions proved to be wrong. While studying drama, I had to learn parts from plays by Molière, Racine and Shakespeare. They did not illustrate the black experience I sought to express. Moreover there were few parts black actors could play on the French stage. Classical theater did not answer my needs. With some African and West Indian friends I decided to create a troupe. It was called Shango. We staged plays by a Martiniquan poet and playwright Aimé Césaire, by Afro-American authors such as Imamu Baraka and by many unknown African and South American playwrights. We played in small theaters and cultural centers all over France, but general audiences had little interest in our productions. We realized that it was very hard to break through the established structures of French theater and that blacks were not more welcome on the stage than they were anywhere else. So I decided to make films and produce them on an independent basis. I learned about film by being first an actor and then an assistant director."

Med Hondo's aim as a theater actor or a stage director had been to present black authors to expatriate Africans. Yet his wish to reach wider audiences made him turn toward cinema as a means of expression:

"I wanted to explain myself and explain Africa and the Africans. I wanted to explain the causes, structures, and consequences of immigration to audiences whether French, European or universal. Yet above all, I wanted to gear my message to the Africans and the black world."

"I make films to show people the problems they face everyday and to help them fight those problems. I decided to make films to bring some black faces to the lily-white French screens, which have been ignoring us and the black contribution to the world for years. People need films and television programs to explain Africa and the Africans and the discrimination faced by migrants in France. People have to stop considering us a homogenous swarm of grasshoppers and acknowledge our ethnic differences. The absence of the black presence in the French media is due to racism. For three centuries due to historical circumstances, a whole people has been led to believe that it was superior to the people it had colonized. Such an ideology has not been eradicated in the past twenty years in spite of African independence."
Hondo's views, those of an African filmmaker residing in France, are similar to Ousmane Sembene's and other African filmmakers making films in Africa. As Sembene said,

"Cinema is as vital for us as building hospitals and schools and feeding our own people. It is important for us to have our own cinema. It enables us to see, feel and understand ourselves through the mirror of film. Ours is a committed cinema, useful and educational. It is useful because it raises an awareness in people. It is educational because it teaches people a mode of conduct, a way of looking at the future and their own lives."

Like many African filmmakers Hondo is the total creator of most of his works. His style is very personal and his plots are usually his sole responsibility. Except for his latest film, WEST INDIES (1979), he has written all of his scripts, directed, produced, and distributed his films on an independent basis, limiting his budget by using a basic crew and reduced equipment.

Med Honda made two shorts, BALADE AUX SOURCES (BALLAD TO THE SOURCES) and PARTOUT OU PEUT-ETRE NULLE PART (EVERY WHERE, MAYBE NOWHERE) in 1969 before making his first feature length film in 1970, SOLEIL O (O,SUN).[3]

SOLEIL O

SOLEIL O is a black and white film made over five years on a low budget of $125,000. It has been hailed by many as the most significant expatriate African film. It owes its title to an old song that the African slaves used to sing aboard ships on their way to the West Indies. Since slaves were the first Africans forced from their native land, Honda aptly selects this song to name his film, which is about the alienation of contemporary black Africans working in France. In the opening sequence of SOLEIL O, which serves as a background for the credits, Honda uses a cartoon showing an African put into power by foreign military intervention and then dethroned by the ones who had formerly helped him. Honda announces that his film will be a pamphlet, denouncing foreign imperialism in Africa from slavery to neo-colonialism. He expands on this theme in one of the following sequences, in which the cross of the recently baptized Africans becomes a sword with which they proceed to kill one another.

The film offers a series of sketches describing the illusions and miseries of black African workers in France. Yet whether migrant workers or intellectuals, all blacks living in France (Africans and West Indians alike) unite under the banner of their common blackness. Hondo uses as a protagonist a very young accountant eager to come to France, as eager as Diouana, Sembene’s main character in his film BLACK GIRL (1966). The accountant does not have any name and sybolizes the condition of all the Africans exiled in France. His blackness makes him socially nameless. He moves through the various settings constituting the life of an African in France. Throughout his film, Hondo violently attacks the mirages and effects of colonialism. Using a Marxist analysis, Hondo scrutinizes how people act within this new human condition. With satire, Hondo attacks common stereotypes, e.g., he
humorously presents us with a white-looking West Indian who has transmitted "blackness" to his baby. Then, he shows an impotent black African, far from the "black stallion" stereotype that still pervades many black and white minds.

In SOLEIL O, Med Hondo reveals how the French and African bourgeoisie collaborate in African workers' migration. Yet, although he makes clear the political and economical factors, he also stresses the hero's existentialist quest for self, as the young African accountant's inner conflicts result in a metaphoric choice to return to africanity.

As an accountant, the protagonist is symbolically the recorder of past and present facts and figures. He understands the complicated capitalist world, which he discusses with a French executive. He is the alienated hero par excellence. His race and schooling put him halfway between proletarian and intellectual. In several scenes throughout the film, Hondo's protagonist identifies with the other groups of blacks present in France. Briefly, the accountant takes up street sweepers of Paris or studies in a symbolic classroom. The film demonstrates that whatever the accountant's status within the French social hierarchy, his condition as an ostracized black man remains the same. Hondo stresses:

"My main character can be a garbage collector, a student or a teacher. His status does not prevent him from being affected in the same manner by the general conditions of a racist society. If I take the subway, I have to face the same problems as a migrant worker. To be black in France is an identity. You might be stopped in the subway by the police verifying your papers or alien card. Whatever his job or diploma, any black or Arab daily meets racism. OPEC prices might go up and violence occurs. One or two Arabs might get killed in street fights with the French. A West Indian might be mistaken for an Arab and shot. In France racism is no longer subtle or latent, but violent."

France's assimilationist policies in her colonies had systematically disfigured African cultures. Nonetheless, the accountant is aware of the richness of the African past. He says:

"We had our own civilization. We forged iron ... we had our own judicial and educational systems."

In Africa, as we see in the film, he had participated in a collective baptism. Hondo critiques such forced assimilation as he has one of the participants say to the priest: "Forgive me father, I have spoken Bambara." The priest baptizes him using the following words: "Receive the salt of wisdom. Discard the spirit of evil and accept our lord Jesus Christ. I baptize you John. Go in peace and the Lord be with you." The accountant then recalls his schooling: "I started to study graphs and speak like Moliere." Arriving in France he sings praises to his adopted motherland:

"Sweet France, I am whitened by your culture but I remain Negro like at the beginning. I bring you the greetings of Africa. Sweet France, to thee I come. I am coming home."

Later applying for jobs, the character cannot believe he's been rejected because of the color of his skin. He thinks:
"I know it is not discrimination. I am at home. We had the same ancestors. They were all Gallic!"

Prisoner of a world that he does not understand and that does not match his previous dreams, the young accountant experiences his first feelings of isolation and treason in a symbolic way. He reads posters and graffiti that say, "Stop the Negro-Arab invasion!" and "Paris is being blackened. 500,000 blacks are in Paris." He also notices that unions do not seem to care about the African workers' plight. Although a young leftist assures him a new, more equitable socialist order will come, African workers seem only there to meet the needs of the Western economy. In vocational schools they learn only a kind of technical French, more geared to industrial use than cultural growth and upward mobility. When a janitor criticizes, "We have enough blacks here. Go back home," the young accountant replies, "Can you tell me where I am from?" This could also be interpreted as, "Can you tell me who I am?"

Rejecting his past dreams, the accountant now faces daily hardships. He mingles with other Africans, but he finds himself estranged from some of his compatriots: "small African kings in their pink marble palace." Furthermore, racial estrangement exists among some blacks, as seen in the scene where two West Indians of different color insult each other with, "Dirty nigger." Such alienation forces the young accountant to new awareness. Alienated from the Western world, he will go through different phases of anguish and near insanity.

The last sequence of SOLEIL O shows the protagonist in a forest. Invited to eat with a French family vacationing at their country house, he is shocked by their waste, which the film symbolically extends to represent the waste of the western World. Their children are left so free and careless that they step on the food set on the lunch table. Disgusted by acts so strongly opposed to his own values and because of his own deprivation, the young African leaves and walks and then runs into the forest. Breathless, he falls at the bottom of a tree where he has visions of Third World fighters such as Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Mehti Ben Barka and Malcolm X. Hondo explains the film's ending:

"[It] reflects the ideological progress which has taken place in my character's mind. It symbolizes his new awareness, which parallels his own escape. He has visions of historical figures who have fought so that what has happened to him won't occur again. These heroes fought colonialism, a fight that has existed since the very beginning of Western imperialism in Africa and that is seldom mentioned by the official Western media."

Cracking machine guns resound in the protagonist's mind. As is the case for Sembene's hero in LE MANDAT (THE MONEY ORDER, 1969), Hondo makes the hero's individual experience a collective one. The accountant sees images of a new self amidst a new world as he collapses at the tree's roots, metaphorically his cultural womb. It is through his roots that he will reconcile the various parts of his severed self and recover his identity as a progressive African. The film offers a symbolic representation of an emotion described by Frantz Fanon:

"In order to ensure his salvation and to escape from the supremacy of
the white man’s culture, the native feels the need to turn back toward his unknown roots ..." [5]

According to Med Hondo, SOLEIL O has been well received by varied audiences. The film’s style is reminiscent of Godard’s politically intricate films and European avant-garde theater. However, Hondo prefers to link his work to African oral tradition:

"There are different perceptions of one image. SOLEIL O is crystal-clear and is neither intellectual nor sophisticated. It has often happened that those who understand it best are illiterate. This film was shown in Algeria. There, the proletarians explained the film to intellectuals because the proletariat thoroughly identified with it."

"SOLEIL O derives from the oral African tradition and depicts an unique reality. There is no dichotomy between style and content; here it is the content that imposes a style. I wanted to describe several people through one person. In my country when people talk about a specific thing, they may digress and come back to their initial topic. Black cultures have a syntax which has nothing to do with Cartesian logic. We should not tell a linear story as it happens in Hollywood but we should narrate it as an African and the African way."

SOLEIL O has a syncopated, eruptive tone that reminds me of the stylistically disruptive tone of some French-speaking black writers such as Frantz Fanon, Léon Damas and Aimé Césaire, as they, too, describe the search for self within a context of continuous racist oppression.

Two years after SOLEIL O, Hondo made LES BICOTS NEGRES, VOS VOISINS (DIRTY ARABS, DIRTY NIGGERS, YOUR NEIGHBORS), a $155,000, 150 mm., color film about black and Arab workers in France. A lucid, sincere and intricate political film, it demonstrates how French neocolonialism exploits migrant labor and exerts a cultural imperialism over their minds. The film starts after the end of the Algerian war. At one point, some executives of the French industrial world plan to maintain economic domination over their former colonies by putting "trustworthy" Africans into power to serve the executives’ interests, i.e., to create a new black elite in so-called independent African countries. It also has a sequence on cinema as a means used to pacify Third World people while diverting their attention from the problems affecting them. LES BICOTS NEGRES, VOS VOISINS structurally reminds us of SOLEIL O’s avant-garde style. Rejecting that style, many African and European critics find the film’s ideological impact weakened by a lack of continuity between sequences and by the disruptive pacing.[6]

Between 1974 and 1978 Hondo lived several months with the Saharouis, and made two feature-length color documentaries about the Polisario struggle for independence in Western Sahara: NOUS AURONS TOUTE LA MORT POUR DORMIR (WE’LL HAVE ALL DEATH TO SLEEP) and POLISARIO, UN PEUPLE EN ARMES (POLISARIO, A PEOPLE IN ARMS). With the Saharouis, Hondo experienced bombings and the people’s exodus from one camp to another in their attempt to liberate themselves from Mauritanian and Moroccan armed occupation. Because of their shared experience, Hondo’s camerawork illustrates the people’s
social reality. He films the harsh realities of the fighters amidst the beauty of desert landscapes while interviewing the people about their most pressing political issues. In editing, Hondo recovered the lyrical tone, the slow pacing, the cyclical timing and the social space often found in African cinema and absent from the former films he shot in France. These documentaries emerge from and illustrate a different context.

Hondo mostly distributes his films though his own company, Les Films Soleil O, named after his first feature film. Since he has to work as an independent filmmaker within his own financial means, he also earns money dubbing black actors' voices from U.S. films into French:

"I have dubbed films such as BLUE COLLAR; I have dubbed Mohamed Ali. But as the production of U.S. films with black actors decreases, I'll soon be without a job."

WEST INDIES

WEST INDIES, LES NEGRES MARRONS DE LA LIBERTE (WEST INDIES, THE BLACK FREEDOM FIGHTERS, 1979), Hondo's latest film, marks a landmark in African films and a turning point in Med Hondo's career. He spent seven years to prepare and find the producers for WEST INDIES, a $1,350,000 color musical epic. He finally co-produced it with several investors, among them private Senegalese and Ivorian investors (doctors and lawyers), the Mauritanian National Film Center, and Algerian television. The film's budget surpasses that of any other African film. It illustrates black experience from the slave trade to present day neocolonialism and depicts French imperialism in both Africa and the West Indies. As Hondo describes it,

"WEST INDIES is adapted from a play Les Negriers (The Slavers) by Daniel Boukman, a Martiniquan French teacher presently residing in Algeria. I staged his play in Paris, and Boukman agreed to let me adapt his work. Since I do not believe in improvisation, I wrote a very precise script. I worked for three months with professional actors and technicians. Only the old man who plays the ancestor in the film is not an actor. He's a born storyteller and his use of the creole language was essential for the part he plays in WEST INDIES, which is in French and Creole."

When interviewed in August 1979, Hondo felt very optimistic as to the success of his film which Gaumont distributes,[7] yet he understood the risk of presenting French audiences with a film which might baffle them. Although shown at the Venice Film Festival, WEST INDIES did not encounter vast enthusiastic audiences. Black viewers in Paris all hailed Hondo's bravery, militant intentions and daring entrepreneurship, but they remained divided as to the political significance of WEST INDIES. Many felt that the dancing and choruses interfered with its general political impact. Hondo sought to use capitalist film production and distribution to establish an anti-capitalist dialectic within his film.

Some critics, such as the Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé, did not worry about how much WEST INDIES cost (the slave boat used in the film cost $250,000),
although other African filmmakers have only modest budgets for their films (from $20,000 for Haile Gerima's HARVEST 3000 YEARS to $500,000 for Ousmane Sembene's CEDDO). Condé considers that Honda has opened a new era for African filmmakers. She states:

"For too long a time, African cinema has been conceived as a poor cinema, a cinema of approximations where techniques did not match ideas ... Militant cinema can thus be beautiful and rich ... Indeed, WEST INDIES ... is no more a West Indian film than an African film. It is a film which summons all the people whose past is made out of oppressions, whose present is made out of aborted promises and whose future is left to be conquered."[8]

Other analyses of WEST INDIES, while respecting and admiring Honda's dedication, expressed some reserve as to the revolutionary content of his work. Ina Césaire, the daughter of the Negritude poet and Martiniquan politician Aimé Césaire, stresses:

"The film does not provide any solution. Maybe it expresses the confused feeling that in the immediate future the people of Martinique will not be ready to go out in the street, to take up arms. The film does not go beyond the present ..."[9]

WEST INDIES' crew matches the overall message Honda wanted to convey through his film and represents the geographic scattering of the Black Diaspora: Honda is Mauritanian, Boukman is from Martinique, Linda Dingwall, the choreographer, is black North American and the actors are West Indian, African and black North American. Like the crew, the title, too, extends linguistically and symbolically beyond the boundaries of the French-speaking world.

Med Hondo has an unique talent in terms of rhythm, editing and music. Generally, film critics describe him as an African filmmaker, and film historians include him in their anthologies of African cinema although his films do not fit the pattern followed by most African directors. African cinema is usually aimed at Africans in Africa. It is based on linear narratives with occasional flashbacks and flashes forward, open spaces, mostly African settings, and slow pacing. However, what constitutes African cinema is not the fact that it is made with African actors or even directed by an African. African cinema has to contain imagery, symbols and values pertaining to African societies.

Hondo, an African, mostly portrays Africans in alien surroundings (SOLEIL O; LES BICOTS NEGRES, VOS VOISINS; and WEST INDIES) to illustrate problems of emigration and neocolonialism. Yet by using syncopated images and sounds to treat a subject which is African but geographically alien to Africa, Honda does not largely represent African imagery and philosophies. His political discourse is aimed at emigrants and French audiences. His style bears the mark of such a displacement, and his film language often reflects European influences such as Godard’s militant style and some avant-garde theater techniques. In SOLEIL O and
WEST INDIES, Honda translates intricate political dialectics that deal with Africans and people of African descent, but which take place in a non-African context. Here, the creative forces are hybrid. The language Honda uses is mostly French. Unlike Sembene he is not primarily addressing his message to specific African ethnic groups but to a broader audience.

Med Honda's themes and film techniques diverge from other African filmmakers. In France, he speaks for African migrants and has access to technical facilities and professional opportunities he would have lacked had he gone back to Mauritania. Yet, the essence of Hondo's films and his purpose in making them remains African. Like Sembene, Hondo claims kinship with African values such as the timeless oral tradition, and he does not favor art for art's sake. As a militant of the African cause, he remains faithful to the immemorial African principle of functional art. His is a committed cinema. As African American filmmaker Haile Gerima puts it,

"Honda's films are African because he bears within himself Africa's stories, cultures, landscapes and sounds."[10]

A vibrant *griot*, Honda is the herald of the new expatriate African cinema, which has recently emerged from the cultural matrix of Mother Africa.

**Notes**

1. France's black population (African as well as West Indian French citizens) is said to reach one million people. Other counts, including undocumented aliens residing in France, claim that France's black population reaches two million.

2. All the statements by Med Honda and Ousmane Sembene derive from interviews conducted by Pfaff during the summers of 1978 and 1979 in Paris and Dakar, and the translations from the French are by Pfaff.

3. SOLEIL O is distributed in the U.S. by New Yorker Films.

4. See reviews of Sembene's films, especially BLACK GIRL, in JUMP CUT, No. 27 (1982).


7. One of the major French production and distribution companies.


10. From a conversation with Haile Gerima at Howard University on September 3, 1980.