

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Med Hondo, interview Working abroad

by Mark Reid

translated from French by Sylvie Blum

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The following interview was taped on July 6, 1982, with Med Hondo, actor, director and spokesperson for the African Filmmakers Committee (Comit Africain de Cinastes). The other members of that committee are these: Sembene Ousmane (Senegal), Paulin Vleyra (Senegal), Souleyman Cisse (Mali), J.M. Tchissou Kou (Congo), Karamo Lancine (Ivory Coast), Abacar Samb (Senegal), Daniel Kamusa (Cameroon), Diconque Pipa (Cameroon), Jules Takam (Cameroon), Mustapha Alassan (Niger), Safi Faye (Senegal), Ola Balugun (Nigeria), Film du Ghana, Sidiki Baka (Ivory Coast), Haile Gerima (Ethiopia) and Julie Dash (USA).

Med Hondo acted in Costa Gravas's *SHOCK TROOPS* (1968), Roberto Enrico's *ZITA* (1968), and John Huston's *A WALK WITH LOVE AND DEATH* (1969). He has directed the short films *BALLADE AUX SOURCES* (1967), *PARTOUT ET PEUT-ETRE NULLE PART* (1968), and *MES VOISINS* (1971). His feature films are *SOLEIL O* (1971), *BICOTS NEGRES NOS VOISINS* (1974), and *WEST INDIES* (1981). In the U.S., New Yorker Films distributes *SOLEIL O*.

REID: How do you finance your films?

HONDO: I financed *SOLEIL O* (1971) with a year and a half's salary dubbing U.S. black voices into French. Ironically, I can't dub white roles yet whites dub black American voices from Hollywood films into French.

I made all my films except for *WEST INDIES* [his latest film] with savings. I am no exception. Don't U.S. black filmmakers work like this?

REID: The independent filmmakers, not those who work in Hollywood.

HONDO: Are many blacks in Hollywood?

REID: Not by a long shot. Sidney Poitier, Michael Schultz, Fred Williamson, Max Boulois and Jamaa Fanaka. Films like *SPAFT* are now too dangerous for Hollywood. Black American filmmakers have to teach or work commercially and

save like you did.

HONDO: For all African filmmakers, filmmaking is linked to control over economics, politics, and raw materials. If Senegal grows peanuts, the sale price is decided at Paris or Washington. The movie industry, peanuts, copper and iron are the same thing. Multinational firms in Europe and the United States control the world's policy. It's not by chance that some African states demand a new and international monetary system.

Our African films are underused and underdeveloped. We have good ideas but do not have a way of financing and distributing films. There's no African movie industry that would allow us to produce our own image. It's similar to that underdevelopment in the U.S. that native Americans and the black Americans face, who do not have the money to produce and distribute films nor do they own their own theaters.

REID: But don't Ciprofilms and C.I.D.C. distribute and produce African films?

HONDO: These two organizations have existed for only two years. Ciprofilms is only administrative, with no film production. It was formed to produce but it doesn't produce. C.I.D.C., the distribution branch, only distributes European and American films. Is this normal?

REID: That's another tonit of 'normal' colonialism.

HONDO: They replace the former French companies and distribute the very same films. Africa has to purchase old reels of movies which have circulated twenty or thirty times and even buys these at higher prices. When C.I.D.C. does buy some of Sembene Ousmane's films, they pay less than for most of the European films. These two companies work against the African filmmaker. Our Comit6 Africain de Cinastes (Committee of African Filmmakers) wants the United States to buy African films just as Africa buys Hollywood westerns. Now we do not see African films on television, at the movies, anywhere. We have the same relationship to French television, too.

It's not up to Europe to solve African problems, but it's up to the Africans themselves. If we attack U.S. multinationals, it's because they collect a lot of dollars in our African countries, with no bilateral relationships or exchange. If I write in La Monde that the French TV channels don't distribute African films, it's because Africa consumes French films everyday, and French TV does not show anything African but only U.S. or French serials.

REID: Similarly, we black independent filmmakers in the U.S. rarely have the film and the television industry buy our work, yet black Americans consume a lot of Hollywood film and commercial television. It's time black Americans and black Africans work together.

HONDO: Yes. We also want it, but with which ones? Some blacks are sent to us by the C.I.A.. We're used to that. We've been screwed, robbed, and murdered, sometimes even by our own brothers.

I think that black American filmmakers cannot manage to make films because they

expect the multinationals to solve their problems. That's not possible. For example, NAACP wanted to boycott Hollywood. Africans do not want the boycott. They want movies. Alienated people do not have the self-consciousness to stop that desire. You would need a revolutionary state in power that would dictate "Stop European and American film consumption." A government, not a minority. Could a black American manage to convince 15 million blacks to boycott images? We shouldn't dream.

REID: Don't you like the independent filmmaking alternative?

HONDO: Yes, but put 'independent' between parentheses. When I buy Kodak film, where is my independence? When I need to buy a projector or I use a distributor and go through multinational corporations, where is my independence? We are marginalized — not marginals. I don't wish to work on the margins. The others ghettoize me because they don't want African movies to be sho'i'n in U.S. theaters. In Europe, some artists want to be outsiders. They don't want to deal with the system, and they call themselves independent. But it's false. We are oppressed by a system and cannot be "independent." I myself cannot independently express myself — for my own sake, for my family, my friends, or my black American Third-World brothers.

I'm talking for black-African filmmakers and am not familiar with black-American filmmakers. 99% of African filmmakers are 'petits-bourgeois' who want to reproduce how Europeans make movies and rise in the social hierarchy. They do not want to become Europeans but to have similar social, economical and material assets, such as cars, sex, cigars, suits. The 1% Who are not like that individualistically think they can succeed alone. They think Sembene Ousmane manages on his own, yet today no African filmmaker can make it alone. African filmmakers have to work together with one single voice and with festivals and salespeople. If they are not united as one strength, even small, African filmmakers will not make it.

African filmmakers have to fight on a double front to reach people. They have problems with their president, their cultural minister, and with multinationals. Most African countries' policies do not see film industry as a way to awaken people, yet we can't develop our country if we don't develop the people's consciousness. Similarly, as long as black Americans don't know exactly who they are, where they stand in today's world, why they suffer, and why they go through unemployment and drugs, they can't be strong or grow.

Movie-making is a means of development for us in a way it is not for Europeans. Our historical level of development means we can't make films like Europeans. We can't afford it nor does it correspond to our way of thinking, our culture, or our historical moment. I can't conceive of a STAR WARS or APOCALYPSE NOW, but only films which correspond to the social reality I live in. That reality is that the wealthy Western world is murdering Third World people. The rich want to become richer. No humanism, no agreement, no brotherhood exists between the poor and the rich, the North and the South.

I have no solutions, but those of us interested in these current historical difficulties should be able to gather and establish policies directly from which we can start

working. As long as we black American and black African filmmakers have no unity, even small, we will continue what I've been doing — make a film every five years. But if a child born in Mauritania tomorrow or in Senegal ten years from now wants to make films, s/he will encounter the same problems. That's not a solution.

Our enemy comes from within ourselves and our way of thinking. Palestinians' and Arabs' enemies are not just Zionists. We have our own Palestine: it's South Africa. Some presidents in the DAN refuse to understand that African problems take root in the people of Africa themselves. Apartheid is the Nazism that Europeans almost suffered. That's why African and black American intellectuals should commit themselves to their mutual history and know who the enemy is. They may make films or paint or sell chocolate or do tapestry, it all amounts to the same thing. People must choose the world they belong to.

REID: Could you talk about the conference at Niamey in Niger? What happened?

HONDO: Upon the filmmakers' initiative, conferences at Niamey and Ouagadougou are taking place every two or three years — whenever possible. The solutions proposed are always the same — regrouping efforts. "Television and the film industry should organize. Filmmakers should make better films. Their films should be shown in Africa." All these theories have been developed for years.

The only difference is that just one country took the initiative to organize the festival and became aware of the need to defend the film industry like any other industry. The state encouraged it by saying: "Filmmaking is important. Filmmakers should gather, form a platform, and find a solution." For the first time, an African country took upon itself to organize the festival. That's all. The debates basically remain the same.

There's been a good intention of forming a film school in Burkina Faso. But in reality it's a poor school. How can we train movie technicians, if the conditions for making films don't exist. Who teaches in these schools? And what do they teach? It would serve no purpose to have European instructors show how movie-making is done in Europe. We must ask, 'Do we have the money to make films in Africa by Africans?' It does not help an African to study for 3, 4, 5 years to learn how to work with sound and camera and then have no means of making films in Africa. That's the real problem.

Financial means do exist. In Africa, moviegoers give away millions of dollars each year. This money is not well managed. Certainly the receipts do not finance African movie-making. It's European and American movies that make money in Africa, and the receipts go to New York, Paris, London and Rome. After the distribution companies rent their films or sell them at high costs, there's no money left. The government takes a 35% tax and this also does not go into the film industry. Even 50% of Hollywood production is financed by profits made abroad.

Inside ghettos, those who make a lot of money have no interest in seeing the ghetto becoming aware. They don't want millions of Africans to refuse to see James Bond and prefer the work of Sembene Ousmane or Med Hondo.

We are all colonized. As long as people are not liberated, they are ghettoized. Today the Third World countries are colonized mentally, economically, politically, and

culturally.

REID: In Mauritania, are your films censored?

HONDO: No, since 1978, my films have been sold in Mauritania. Before that they were censored because they criticized the former government. Sembene Ousmane has had a similar history. But not all African filmmakers want to make films as I and Sembene do. All filmmakers are mentally colonized. Some only want to climb the social ladder and own a car or villa or have glamorous sex. It becomes abnormal when they continue to dream impossible dreams. I tell them, "You can't do it. You are black Africans." Even if films based on a Hollywood style have won a prize in Cannes, they've been killed in commercial outlets. We can put it in these terms: The enemy will not allow us to be independent if we ourselves do not become autonomous. We still have to go to all the festivals — to Moscow, Hollywood, to Chicago — but only under certain conditions. The Western world has created these festivals as markets. Filmmakers there should not have an illusion about the folklore.

They invite Med Hondo, Souleyman Cisse, a Moroccan, a black American, just to prove that they are open-minded. If Cannes became a promotion festival for African filmmaking or Third

World films, then I'll encourage it. Now we have to go there to insult them if necessary and tell them: "You are a rip-off. You're robbers. What about the Civil Rights you always advocate? It's only for whites, not for Africans, not for black Americans. It's only good for you. You continue to exploit and kill these people."

If we have the chance, we should always go to Hollywood with our films. When the films are not sold or shown in a theater, if they are good and professionally recognized as such, then we want them to be shown the way U.S. films are shown in France or Africa. When they don't show the films, tell them, "You, Motherfuckers. You're rip-offs, gangsters, mafiosi..." And then in Moscow, if they don't buy the films, do exactly the same thing. One must go to such festivals to fight, and to make contacts under certain conditions. For WEST INDIES (1981), I went to MGM in New York, and they told me they were ready to invest \$1.5 million right away if only I changed the subject. I told them: "Fuck it. If it's not the same subject, why ask me to do it? Do it yourself." If Hollywood asks me to do a film, I'll say O.K. and propose a film on Malcolm X or any other story on black Americans. I want them to leave me free to do the film as I feel it and as black Americans feel it. Otherwise, I'm not interested.

REID: Can you make a film without Western capital?

HONDO: Not without the proper means. Yet, our stories don't appeal to the Western producers. C.A.C. (Committee of African cineastes) thinks we must film our reality at all costs. Even with incompleting films, we must record our collective and historical memory. We have to, witness, to leave a few reels of film. That's a real advantage — some reels of films remain. And when the workers go to see them in Mauritania they say that they don't want to go to France and work there but had

better stay in their country. The French people colonize us, they do it to the Mauritians right here, whose skin is as dark as mine. I'd like to bear witness for the future so someone will say: "Ah, you French gentlemen, you killed the emigre workers who went to work in France. When capitalism did well, you sent for workers, modern slaves. When you were in trouble, you dumped them in the garbage or the sea." This message is inside good films.

REID: What is the role of the Third World artist?

HONDO: They must act within their own society — write poetry, books, paint. So-called intellectuals bear the responsibility of representing

the thinking of Africans, black-Americans, Arabs and Asians. They have an historical duty to light the world. If they do this, it's not to end up with a Mercedes. Those types who want that are my enemies, not to be killed, for I don't carry a gun. But they are no friends. They've betrayed human history and their own people.

REID: Which filmmakers do you like?

HONDO: Everyone knows I like Sembene Ousmane. I only know one European filmmaker, whom I see every six months — Bertrand Tavernier. He used to be press attache when I was shooting my first film and was the only one who visited and encouraged me. He said I filmed the truth. I haven't met many U.S. black filmmakers because of the distance. I know Haile Gerima because he's Ethiopian and lives there, and I've met Julie Dash and Ossie Davis. Ossie and I met in New York, Because he was on a shoot, we could not talk very long, but we quickly realized we were in the same boat. Does he still make films today?

REID: Like you, he would like to make films but the big companies don't want to produce them. The same thing haooened to Gordon Parks after he made LEADBELLY (1976) about a Black blues musician. The character was very tough, saying things like, "You can't kill my mind" when he was in jail next to a big white guy carrying a gun. That's how the film ends, not with a death. But now it's all over. Hollywood does not go for films like LEADBELLY any longer.

HONDO: It's always the same story. Yet, if Gordon Parks did succeed, even if he became a millionaire, it would not change black Americans' problems. Why isn't there any black film distribution network in the United States? We hear about a black bourgeoisie

REID: There is such an organization, the Black Filmmakers' Foundation.

HONDO: But why doesn't the bourgeoisie give money? Why don't they buy theaters? I believe Chicago is full of theaters.

REID: Yes, but the people who have money, especially black people, do not want to gamble with the entertainment industry.

HONDO: It's a matter of power. They don't have power.

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