Sub-Saharan African Women Filmmakers: Agendas for Research with a Filmography

Caveat

If I have learned anything in nearly 15 years of research on filmmaking by Africans, it is that not enough is known about filmmaking in every sub-Saharan African country to make generalizations about the subcontinent, and that much that has been written about African filmmaking especially in the West, but also in Africa, is hemmed in by implicit biases about filmmaking being primarily feature films made by a Hollywood-like film industry. The result has been many inaccurate generalizations about filmmaking in Africa and endless complaints about what is wrong with African filmmaking when compared to filmmaking in the West, India and other countries where there is a film industry. This kind of writing does not lead to an understanding of filmmaking in Africa.

Women are engaged in filmmaking throughout the subcontinent, despite published statements to the contrary. This essay focuses on the kinds of research that need to be conducted to identify and learn about all women’s filmmaking activities. As the quotation above suggests, women are active in many facets of filmmaking, not just as


film directors. The filmography at the end of this essay includes only feature, documentary and television films that I have been able to learn about. It excludes video projects that I am aware of, since I have not had time to do research on the films completed by these projects. However, it is essential that research be conducted on women’s self-help video projects sponsored by governments and non-governmental organizations, since they have potential impact for women as both filmmakers and film viewers.

I read more than 7,000 sources in compiling the two volumes of my bibliographies of sub-Saharan African films and filmmakers. Although I regularly consult newspapers and popular magazines published in Africa, the volume of publication is too vast for any one person to consult. Perhaps as a bibliographer I understand better than most people who write about African cinema that what we know, or think we know, does not represent what really exists.

Basic bibliographic research on African filmmaking remains to be done, for both women and men. What is needed for every African country is an audiovisual bibliography/filmography comparable to Bernth Lindfors’s Bibliography of Literary Contributions to Nigerian Periodicals. Only after detailed research has been conducted on all aspects of local film production in all African countries can generalizations be made. The following essay can provide only suggestions about some of the research that is needed.

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African and Third World women filmmakers were the focus of Les Journées du Cinéma Africain in Montréal in 1989, the Mannheim

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4 A problem with the majority of publications on African cinema is that they are journalistic, not scholarly. I have dealt with the problems with the literature on African cinema, which are too numerous to be discussed here, in “The Bibliography of Films by Sub-Saharan African Filmmakers.” Africana Resources and Collections: Three Decades of Development and Achievement, ed. Julian Witherell. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1989), pp.151-177.