

Contemporary African Film at the 13th Annual Carter Lectures on Africa: Interviews with Filmmaker Salem Mekuria and Film Critic Sheila Petty

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The University of Florida's Center for African Studies hosted its thirteenth annual Gwendolen M. Carter Lectures on Africa from March 22-25 on the Florida campus. This year's conference, "Africa on Film and Video", was organized by Mark Reid, Associate Professor of English, and featured presentations by film scholars Mbye Cham (Howard University), Samba Gadjigo (Mount Holyoke College), Jennifer Machiorlatti (University of Michigan, Flint), Sheila Petty (University of Regina), Nokwenza Plaatjies (Howard University and Friends World College), and Frank Ukadike (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor). Cham's overview of contemporary trends in African cinema appears in this issue.

Salem Mekuria was present both as a critic and a filmmaker. In addition to her films *Ye Wonz Maibel* (*Deluge*) and *As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West*, other films screened during the conference included *Taafé Fanga* (Adama Drabo, Mali, 1997), *Dakan* (Mohamed Camara, Guinea, 1997), *Flame* (Ingrid Sinclair, Zimbabwe, 1996), *Clando* (Jean-Marie Teno, Cameroon, 1996), *Everyone's Child* (Tsitsi Dangarembga, Zimbabwe, 1996), *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, USA, 1991), and *Camp de Thiaroye* (Ousmane Sembene, Senegal, 1989).

Among the new African films screened at the conference, *Deluge*, written and directed by Salem Mekuria stands out as the only one that does not use fictionalized characters to carry the narrative. Mekuria appears as herself to recount the story of Ethiopia's "Red Terror" through personal interviews with her immediate family and close friends. She presents an outpouring of sorrow and confusion that extends beyond personal or familial grief to encompass a national sense of remorse.

I interviewed Salem Mekuria and film critic Sheila Petty. Excerpts from these interviews are reprinted below. Salem Mekuria agreed to discuss her film with me even as she mourned the death of her father, who passed away shortly after her arrival in Gainesville. The interview is presented in his memory.

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v2/v2i1a5.pdf>

RG: Your daughter's interest in Ethiopian history and in your brother Selomon's death pushed you to deal with the painful experiences that your family went through in Ethiopia during the 1970's and 1980's. How did making *Deluge* help you to work out some of your sorrow and confusion about the Ethiopian Revolution?

SM: Well, it made me look very closely at what happened, at what we were responsible for, at what we thought we were doing in those days when we felt like we were at the helm of a revolution, although we didn't really know what the revolution was. It made me look back at all those things. It made me look back at a lot of assumptions about what we were capable of doing. It also made me look at what it meant to lose my brother, because I had not really confronted that issue. Deep down it was always there but there was this fear that if I named it, if I said I lost my brother, then I really would lose him by acknowledging his death. I knew he wasn't going to walk into my living room one day and say, "You know I just came out of someplace." It also made me understand the tragedies--the extent of the tragedies--that Ethiopians suffered. In many different ways it made me face a lot of things that all of us, I think, collectively are trying not to face because it is so horrible.

RG: I recently watched *Deluge* with a Kenyan, who was impressed with your film because it offered a personal entre into a very confusing political situation. He was surprised that you were given permission to make such a film, which so openly opposes the Ethiopian government. Are you able to publicly screen *Deluge* in Ethiopia? If so, how have Ethiopians reacted to the film?

SM: Well, its ... lets see.... Its explicitly opposing the previous government. See we had a nice thing that the Kenyans had, we had the fall of the military regime. So I went home right after the fall of the military regime and was given access to a lot of things by the new transitional government. So it doesn't explicitly oppose the present government. Although, implicitly, any government that is narrow-minded and bent on maintaining a single party system that's sort of very much interested in confining power to a small group of people, would feel a message from this film.

Yes, I did have an opportunity to screen *Deluge* at home. I have a version that is in Amharic, the official language at home, and the reception was unbelievable. Of course, its not being shown on television, which means that the government does understand that it has a certain amount of power in bringing people together. But, people have the tapes; people see them; and every opportunity I get I show it to whatever small groups I can find. So, in that sense, yes, I do have access to showing it.

RG: Do you believe *Deluge* provides people who do not know much about Ethiopian political history with a "fair" assessment of how the revolution affected most Ethiopians?

SM: Well, it's hard to claim such authority. But, I believe I give a very sort of considerate view. It's my view. It's my story, and I chose to say the things I said in the film. But there is a lot of shared knowledge in there. So, in fact, this is one film for which I have not yet had any criticism

about either point of view, or what's in it. In terms of facts or other content, it does give an overview. It's not an in-depth view. It's not really history. It does give an overview from a personal standpoint of what happened. So for people who have really not seen what the human impact of the big story was, it provides an entre into it. And it also makes people more curious about what happened and about the history of Ethiopians. You can't tell the history of anything in an hour or in a series. You can't. So I'm aware of that. But I tried to give a fairly rounded overview of that particular period, and I hope people get that sense and want more and get more curious.

RG: What would you like viewers to come away with from this film? And what do you wish for in American versus Ethiopian responses?

SM: That's very hard. I mean, I want people to understand that every disaster, every tragedy has gone through a process. That is really also what I was working with. That we didn't just one day get up and say, "Bye Haile Selassie!" and then start killing each other. We went through a process that all political changes go through. A process. And that doesn't necessarily make it any easier. But we were not mad people; we are not deranged people that just go around killing each other. There is a background to it and I hope people will come away sensing that everybody is entitled to a process. That there are differences within us, that there are various issues that divide us. But people think about these issues and people act basically, some people, but most people, particularly in this case, I think most of the young people are genuinely interested in the kind of changes that they wished socialism would bring us and they gave their lives for that. So there is ideology. There is political process, and also there is idealism. I want people to see that.

And of course I also want people to share that the tragedy was *not* just this group of people or that group of people. Everybody was involved. I also want people to see that the responsibility was shared. That we can't just blame one person or another person. Everybody owns that responsibility. So these are some of the things that I want. It's also a human story. It's not just a political story. It's not just a mass tragedy. It's very human and those individuals who died touched everyone, my own family included. So those are the things I hope people will take away from it.

RG: In the film your close friends and immediate family members and you yourself all appear as yourselves, without fictionalization of any kind. Most African filmmakers do not take this approach and prefer to deal with complex social and political issues by creating fictional characters to tell their stories for them. Please talk a bit about how you decided to put you and your family's real life experiences at the center of your film.

SM: That's the story I know best, basically. I didn't start out with this film, actually. I started out with a grand documentary history of what happened. And history is very unyielding. You can't really put history on film. I also wasn't a historian, or in any way an authority on what happened. I wasn't there. For me, eventually, after a couple of years of trying to mold this big

giant into a documentary, I had to abandon it and go to the story that I knew best, that is a part of the big history, part of what happened. It's illuminated for me that big mass, huge non-human story and transformed it into a human story. So, for me, fictionalizing it would be removing it one step further. This story was as much a personal story as a big political and official story. So it worked better. I knew the story better. I could say "Hey this is my view; you can go do your own." So it liberated me from having to answer that this happened and not this. For me it was more a sense of writing the story and not having to answer everybody. As I know our people are very conscientious. Everybody has their own take on the story. So, I decided I'll do my own take. That's why I did it.

Fictionalizing? I think about that a lot. I hope to do that because it does give you a lot more room to provide vision, which is not really possible to do in documentary story telling. So, yes; I think it would work as fiction too. And boy do I have great characters for that!

RG: How did you convince your friends and family that your approach was the best way to unveil the horrors of Ethiopia's "Red Terror"?

SM: I don't think they thought about the approach. I think they were just ready to tell their story. I think that they had been silent for so long. First of all they know me. I grew up in their eyes, under their eyes. I was their daughter's best friend, and it was easy for them to sit down and share with me what happened. But more than that I think they were ready to tell their story to anybody, anybody who would listen and value and use it in the way that they feel is justified.

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In an interview with critic Sheila Petty, I asked her to reflect on Salem Mekuria's new film.

RG: The paper you are presenting this week at the Carter Lectures discusses African film as a "borderless cinema" because it seems to articulate identity issues for Africans living in and out of Africa. Does Salem Mekuria's film *Deluge* typify this characteristic, or defy it?

SP: It probably does both at the same time. This is an interesting case because of her decided position as an Ethiopian film maker living and working in the U.S. So, what she's done is use distance as a factor of identity, and she's questioning this in terms of nation and identity at the same time, and how change can be effective in African cinema. So definitely, you can argue that it falls into the category of borderless cinema in terms of Africa because she is making an African film but living in the U.S. What's interesting about this is that it gives her a different perspective, you could say, on the issues that she is dealing with because she is both inside and outside of the issues. Inside because she is Ethiopian, outside because of the distance that she has to the geographical location she is dealing with.

RG: In *Deluge* Salem Mekuria appears as herself, an Ethiopian filmmaker who uses the medium to explore her own family's struggle to survive during the Ethiopian revolution. We see her at

the editing table literally fitting her personal narrative into the history of her country. Why are these shots important to this film? Does Mekuria break new ground, as an African filmmaker, by inserting herself into her work in this way?

SP: I think that what she is doing actually is creating a performative documentary that's very self-reflexive. So she is putting herself literally into the film, and she is questioning her own role in the issues she is dealing with and the role of responsibility, as well. That's what is important. And, as a performative documentary, it is self-reflexive, while history is not; historical fact is not more important in performative documentaries than an evocation of history, which is what she does in the film.

RG: Why do you think that so many different African filmmakers choose to tell their history through fictionalized characters?

SP: I think that fiction film making is one of the first things that got going on the Continent. You look at the so-called forefathers of African cinema (now they are called the grandfathers of African cinema) and they chose to work in fiction film making. It transpired that more and more film makers became interested in working in kind of the same genre, so to speak. It's almost like a tradition. Some are doing documentaries, but I would have to say the emphasis has to be on fiction film making; whether there is more of a market for that could be a plausible reason. People are going to watch fiction films especially if they have relevance to their everyday living, or if people think they are going to see their friends in the film or whatever.

RG: What direction do you think contemporary African filmmakers are taking? Do you think African filmmakers are making films that have the potential of serving as a kind of bridge between Africa and the Diaspora?

SP: Yes, I believe so. Especially now given this kind of important question, "What makes an African film African?" Is it the fact that it's a person from Africa that makes the film, or is it because it's made on the continent, or is it African financing that makes it African film? What about Africans living outside of Africa? There are a lot of Africans living in France who go back to Africa to make their films and then go back to France to distribute them there, and exhibit them worldwide. And what about African Americans who claim sometimes to be making African films or films with African content because there is an evocation of Africa? I think we saw that quite well in Jennifer Machiorlatti's paper on *Daughters of the Dust*. There is a constant reference to Africa through oral tradition, through memories, even through the aesthetics that Julie Dash uses in the film; they are constantly referring to Africa and the ancestors.

RG: Are African films currently being watched in African American community fora? What has to happen for them to reach wider, less specialized audiences?

SP: It certainly is my impression that in the States African Americans definitely want to see African films. When these films come to Canada there is definitely an audience for them. One of the problems I believe is distribution. Certainly in Canada we've got a pretty specific situation,

where Quebec has its own system and Anglophone Canada has its own system of distribution and exhibition. So you can have Francophone films that would not get distributed in English Canada and that would include a lot of African films. If you want to see a lot of African films, the place to go is Montreal for the *View d'Afrique* African film festival. The Toronto International Film Festival has some work in it, but again, it can be subtitled. So there are lots of barriers; there are lots of things that need to be done. And the filmmaker has to agree to have a distributor in North America and it's not always the case that they will accept the terms of distribution.