ENCOUNTERING INDIAN OCEAN WORLDS: CULTURAL DIVERSITY, CINEMA, AND ZIFF

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The increasing importance of cultural diversity as a global discourse for the twenty-first century has multiple roots. Processes of economic and informational globalization have both engaged and called attention to cultural differences and, particularly, to questions about the interactions of the local and distant. Cultural diversity on a global scale has also been influenced by the shifting political and economic alignments of the post-Cold War and post-9/11 world; in the United States, for example, Cold War-era area studies formations have given way to new, more flexible, but also less fixed models reliant on cultural diversity and exchange. Likewise, social and development policies that rely on standards of multiculturalism and agency -- and, in turn, on questions of identity and political participation -- have used cultural diversity as a touchstone. Finally, comparative study across various boundaries of difference, perhaps most prominently the transnational, has emerged to reveal the complex and textured significance of cultural diversity to social and political development around the world.

The United Nations Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has assumed a crucial role in addressing many of these concerns. From its inception in 1946, the organization has addressed the relations of culture to peace, development, and democracy. In 2001, it organization adopted the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. The immediate context for the production of the Declaration was the negotiation over the liberalization of global markets (GATS) at the World Trade Organization; indeed, the document addresses at some length the opening of markets in cultural services and products before concluding that while these markets should be open, they also need to be checked. Relatedly, while the Declaration acknowledges that economic development and political democracy are often overlapping, it eventually rejects any straightforward linkage between free economic markets and free markets of ideas. More familiarly for some, the document makes plain that cultural diversity has an intrinsic value warranting protection. That value, moreover, is grounded in justice, equity, and individual agency, and exercised through dialogue and creativity.

UNESCO is not the only international organization contributing to debates about cultural diversity. In its 2004 World Report on Human Development, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) made clear that cultural (and, often, multicultural) tolerance and freedom bear directly on social and political development and equity. It has
gone further, in fact, by exploring the specific relevance of cinema to such formulations. During the 2005 installment of Africa's largest biennial film festival and marketplace, Le Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou (FESPACO), UNDP sponsored a debate on 'Cinema and Cultural Diversity' that called for the development of cultural policies that 'give priority to dialogue, the sharing of responsibilities and resources, a respect for difference and permanent quest for tolerance.' Cinema was positioned in these discussions as an integral medium expressing cultural freedom, encouraging diversity, and enabling fuller participation in society and public life.

A crucial point should be made here about the meaning of culture and relevance to cinema in these debates. Culture can be approached in terms of expressive or artistic production, the institutional structures that support this creativity, and the external practices that enable their consumption. Yet as a later UNESCO report has put it, culture, particularly in reference to diversity, should also be 'thought of more in terms of...deeply internalised and identity-creating ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and being in the world.' This far-reaching conception relates culture to political participation and public life as well as to individual engagement with worlds local and distant. Thinking of culture in these terms also pushes us to expand our conception of cinema from being merely a medium of artistry and expression to an integral part of individual identities and social lives.

Such an expansion of our definition of culture provokes pressing questions about the very status of cinema as a cultural practice, expressive form, and social, economic, and political institution. Some remarks by the historical sociologist Charles Tilly about the complex place and role of cinema in society seem apt here. He argues that cinema can operate as a site, transmitter, and sometime instrument of struggles over prevailing social, political, and religious values and their related identity claims. Complicating this already complex conception is the argument that the representation of political or social debates also negotiates the place of cinema in a given public sphere as well. The broad constraints generated by national or transnational economies of distribution and exhibition, and the struggles against them, therefore becomes a privileged locus. Contests between producers, regulators, distributors, and public authorities over what the film-consuming public will actually see correspond, in many cases -- including, I argue, at ZIFF -- to the heterogeneity of political and religious issues across society. Overall, we must therefore generally seek to reconcile three contradictory views of cinema in society: as a recorder of the current national (or regional) moral and political climate(s); as a cohesion-promoting instrument of social control and privileging of specific identities; and as an identity-creating or affirming basis for public life and political participation.

Some of the practical consequences of this struggle in writing about cinema and diversity have to do with what are finally the necessarily speculative relationships between individual film productions and the idea of a coherent national or regional cinema, as well as that between either individual films or cinemas and a wider public culture. How can we claim, for example, that the content of a given film, its representations of political debate, or even its production history, is characteristic or reflective of
broader public debates in society? The interconnections between these different (and clearly overlapping) elements seem on their face to be inextricable, particularly in contributing to the 'authoring' of Zanzibari, East African, or Indian Ocean political and cultural life. A major concern is therefore the tendency in critical analyses toward slippage between the pointed summaries of individual film narratives as reflective or symptomatic of, or even substantiating, an expanding public dialogue about, say, politics and religion, and the wider assertions about cinema as an expressive medium and social institution that serves as the site for debate and negotiation about public debate itself. A nuanced relationship must be spelled out explicitly and it is often problematic to do so.

Implicit in discussions of cinema and cultural diversity is the idea of identifiable and cohesive publics shaped or importantly inflicted by cinema. Many of these spheres are Habermasian, that is, common spaces grounded in the cumulative and coherent participation in deliberative and ongoing dialogue and debate, the circulation of knowledge, and the construction of new models for citizenship and civic engagement furthered and oriented by mass-produced media. Often the dialogue and debate is importantly marked by a nationalist or regional discourse or social imaginary. Almost unavoidably, though, the reach of such an argument begs related questions: What other media or social (i.e., non-cinematic) developments contributed to the evolution of a public? Is the emergent sphere a more traditional and predominant Habermasian one? Or, as has been argued for early American cinema, New German Cinema, and post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema, an 'alternative' or even oppositional public sphere? If 'alternative,' who are the central constituents? Women? Youth? The educated? Economic elites? A middle class? Defining a public in this rational way cannot but squarely confront given categories and conceptions of diversity. Furthermore, one might even ask what occurs in a given cinema that doesn't contribute to or shape the public sphere? Lastly, of course, is the possibility of a specifically African (or East African or Indian Ocean) model of public interaction and political engagement that might be formulated to illuminate local cinemas and cultural conditions, identities and communities.

The 6th Zanzibar International Film Festival held in 2003 provides an illuminating case study for the exploration of these wide-ranging questions about cultural diversity and the relations of cinema to given social and political formations. Two major encounters threaded through the ten-day festival. The first was between the Swahili culture of the East African coast and that of the Indian Ocean region as a whole; the second was between dhow countries and the worlds of Europe and the United States, that is, the global North. Not surprisingly for an island society shaped over centuries by a mixing of ethnic groups and creative practices, a lively, two-day long seminar was devoted to the first of these encounters. Many participants in the seminar questioned fixing any essential cultural characteristics and remained sensitive to the status of hybrid culture being more than the sum of its influences. A few voices did call for greater respect for specific Swahili or Muslim practices, particularly for maintaining the putative integrity of expressive traditions in music or storytelling, but most sought not to dwell on the contest between these influences so much as to explore and celebrate their synthesis.
In doing so, these voices invoked the wider conception of culture as a distinctive and deeply-held identity-making way of understanding and being in the world. However, they did so by acknowledging the film festival’s setting and asking about the relations of cinema to culture. One might readily ask how cinema as a relatively recent technological/social/public practice could relate to longer-term cultural relationships and understandings. After all, culture may be understood to encompass specific practices and institutions that enact and perpetuate group identities, traditions, beliefs, and values, but in the context of cinema, it also crucially needs to involve ‘ways of seeing.’ By that phrase, I mean patterns and habits of perception and organising visual and other sensory experience, but also, more generally, the patterns and habits of positioning one’s self or one’s group as politically and morally engaged with that experience and the social and power relations implicated in that engagement.

Individual films screened at the 6th ZIFF appeared as illustrative of many of these discussions. Several of the productions were staples of a contemporary global festival circuit, marked by transnational film and media production and distribution, which also blurs the boundaries of mainstream, festival, and art house cinemas. Among these titles were City of God /Cidade de Deus/ (2002), Fernando Meirelles’ saga of brutal Brazilian gangs, Nowhere in Africa (Caroline Link, 2002), from Germany and the 2002 Academy Award winner for Best Foreign Film, the Australian drama, One Night the Moon (Rachel Perkins, 2001), about an Aboriginal tracker, and Amandla (2002), Lee Hirsch’s tribute to the role of music in the three-decades-long South African struggle against Apartheid.

In terms of the festival’s professed celebration of intercultural encounters and interactions, one might fairly employ the term, ‘global south,’ to convey the varied provenance and politics of many of the films screened in Zanzibar in 2003. That broad rubric, defined by its contradistinction to the global north, emphasizes the contemporary cultural, political, and especially economic divisions that transcend the national and post-date the ideological tensions oriented by the Cold War. Despite the unmistakable contrast presented between global south and north, the consistent emphasis at the festival was on immediate, grounded, and often personal experience. Even in productions about overtly political subjects, in other words, the effort appeared more to focus on human-scale perspective than to advance sweeping glosses of contemporary social conflicts or clashing civilizations. The film program thus sought to address social realities that themselves are complexly defined by, interact with, and re-shape local identities, cultures, and ways of seeing. The emphases on the individual or local in many of the screenings also connected with the official festival themes of youth in the global south and of women in the Dhow countries.

Several film entries directly addressed the theme of seeing through the eyes of the young. A wonderfully textured short, Waiting for Valdez (Dumisani Phakathi, 2002), offered a view of a young coloured boy in impoverished, Apartheid-era South Africa who simultaneously enjoys a warm relationship with his grandmother and exhibits a profound sense of hope for the future (dramatized in the film by the opening of the 1971 Burt Lancaster Western, Valdez is Coming [Edwin Sherin, 1971]). Another festival theme was the place and vision of women. Naliaka is Going (Albert Wandago, 2002) followed
a young woman's journey away from her family, and the choices of employment and arranged marriage they presume to make for her, toward an independent life in Nairobi. *Sita's Family* (Sita Devi, 2002) focused still more directly on the struggles and ambivalences of family in establishing a woman's identity: this Indian production is a personal journey through memories of childhood and female relations, especially between the filmmaker and her deceased mother, who was a prominent political figure. Family expectations were also complexly entangled here with social traditions. An Algerian film, *Rachida* (Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, 2002), tracked a young teacher as she walks to work one morning without wearing her chador (the full-length garment worn by many Muslim women) and is set upon by terrorists, including one of her students, who order her to take a bomb into school; the resulting struggle of wills is extraordinarily well-conceived.

The texture of these films belied the ready abstractions that distant observers of Africa or the Indian Ocean region might have brought to the narratives experiences they portrayed. If many films at the festival problematised the local, they did so not by as much through direct contrast with unremitting global forces as by highlighting the transnational quality of contemporary life. Instead of journeys from south to north, recurrent were narratives of dislocation, border crossings, and individual identities marked by overlapping social and political allegiances. *Dream of Flight* (2002), Nacim Pak's study of Iranian asylum seekers in the west of Turkey, focused on the midway houses where the seekers must stay while awaiting approval of asylum but that also generate anxiety and fear among the Turkish locals surrounding them. Thus, while it is appropriate to cite the encounter between Swahili and Dhow cultures, on the one hand, and between local and global, on the other, such variegated attention remained attentive to twenty-first century fluid identities rather than continuing to fixate on static and sanctified categories like the nation-state or religion.

How can models of cultural diversity account for such fluidity? How does one conceptualise such ways of seeing? Rather than reified categories or boundaries of difference, it was the encounters between them that many of the films emphasised. Moreover, the encounters of diverse individuals and groups appeared as a way of being in the world. In the most probing of the productions, those encounters and ways of being are reflexively presented, in the visual medium of cinema, as multiple ways of seeing the world and others.

Consider the recipient of the 2003 festival's 'Golden Dhow' for Best Documentary Video, *Rhythms from Africa: Zanzibar: An Ocean of Melodies* (Abdulkadir Ahmed Said and Bridget Thompson, 2003). A celebration of the evolution of *taarab* music, the film concluded by questioning the future of the performance-based musical form in the face of recording and, especially, its competition from imported forms like disco -- often Western, but also Arab and Indian -- popular with young people. Besides bringing the predominantly local crowd to its feet dancing, the production spoke directly to the festival's concerns with the geographical specificity of cultural practices, of technology, and of generational taste in the face of tradition. Three other entries employed the title, *Rhythms from Africa*, and considered music across South Africa and, specifically, in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and each underscored the complex and historically shift-
ing local versions of musical syncretism.

These titles unavoidably suggested parallels between music and cinema itself. Perhaps most obviously, the prevalence of documentary and ethnographic productions at the festival drew attention to the claims of truth or transparency made by many filmmakers in their presentation of African lives and experiences. More than an aesthetic preoccupation, at issue here are social and political questions about the possibility and appropriateness of recording and preserving and adapting the past and tradition to contemporary experiences. These are very much the questions of policy makers charting strategies for celebrating and preserving culture as identity-creating practice and the diversity that practice upholds. One might consequently ask, amidst the broader discussions of local or regional cultural practices encouraged by the screening programme, whether the status of film or video (or other cultural forms) is somehow different in the dhow countries from elsewhere in the world.

One can likewise ask whether these are media that, particularly when deployed in the region by indigenous filmmakers or those from outside, offer a more authentic vision of life or one that is somehow reconfigured by the camera. Such questions about the politics of identification and interaction were also readily observable in the exhibition of films, as at the festival during screenings, where, literally, opportunities for identifying and sharing cultural and intercultural experiences were based conspicuously on cinema as a modern technological medium of individual and group expression and participation. Difficult enough for scholars and cultural theorists, these questions pose a greater challenge for policy-makers who view them as either irrelevant or beyond their expertise to address.

The centerpiece film of ZIFF 2003, *Heremakano* [Waiting for Happiness] (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2002), is a French-Mauritanian co-production that touched on many of the issues raised by other festival performers and screenings. It relates the experiences of Noudadhibou, a Malian who finds himself on the West African coast of Mauritania awaiting his departure to Europe. Unable to speak the local language, on a peninsula between sea and desert, Noudadhibou observes and interacts with locals who seem both fascinated by his presence and, immersed in their own activities, indifferent to him. More than a straightforward political statement, though, Sissako's film creates a dreamscape in which the limbo of exile and the hope of the journey converge. The poetic vision of Mauritanian village life avoids, and also calls for reflection on, the linear stories of transit and cultural encounter familiar elsewhere. Such a meditation epitomises the necessary range of storytelling and cinematic strategies in play in relating contemporary transnational experience.

At the same time, on another, institutional and industrial level, Sissako's film is a co-production that calls attention to the distribution alliances and promotion by governments and non-governmental organizations behind many of the screened films. The 2003 festival was sponsored by the Zanzibar government, UNESCO, and the Ford Foundation, among others. Reflecting the complexity of many of the narratives featured at ZIFF, the production histories and industrial affiliations of the films blurred manageable assignments of national origin or film industry. While almost entirely the work of
filmmakers from Africa or the Indian Ocean world, many of the films had credits conspicuously revealing the complexity of their production and thereby urging the revision of notions of originary purity with those of hybridity. Films at the 6th ZIFF about the AIDS pandemic were illustrative and included *The Widows of Shinyanga* (Suvi Andrea Helminn, 2002), *Night Stop* (Licinio Azevedo, 2001), and Simon and I (Beverly Palesa Ditsie, 2001), were illustrative. The latter two films belong to the multi-nation 'Steps for the Future' project of more than forty films about living with HIV and AIDS and made by Africans but largely financed with capital (and, in cases, produced with technical support) from Europe. These hybrid production histories foregrounded a second encounter threading through much of the ZIFF program, that between dhow countries and the worlds of Europe and the United States. Paralleling the stories of particular human concerns played out against multiple and shifting local, regional, and global backdrops in the screening programme were thus accounts of the industrial and trade policies and practices enabling the films' production and distribution. Such a cultural and economic mapping allowed fuller tracking of the particular forces and influences shaping films in, and of, the dhow countries.

By foregrounding the relation of cinema to broader questions of social values and cultural institutions, and, in doing so, remaining mindful of the particular tensions informing Zanzibari, and Indian Ocean region coastal identities and social life, the festival voiced fresh possibilities for approaching the complex subject of contemporary transnational cinema. At the same time, the celebration of the dynamic and vital diversity of cinema, and culture more broadly, was manifest in the screening programme and also in the connections drawn in the Workshop and other discussions between cinema, music, scholarly debate, and other expressive forms from the island and region. Cinema is an especially potent technological medium for highlighting different ways of seeing the world and others and, in doing so, for grounding processes of identity-making and public life. The event made this so clear by effectively mapping the specific situations of the cinemas and other creative forms constituting dhow culture, and demonstrated the promise of such an approach to exploring a fuller range of contemporary transnational film productions and industries.

Yet how well the project of critically mapping the 6th Zanzibar International Film Festival or other specific situations of cinemas accords with UNESCO's schemes for diversity is, finally, less clear. This paper has sought to counterpose the varied efforts of those engaged in critical theory, cultural policy, and cinematic practice (filmmakers, distributors, viewers) as a basis for comprehending and modelling diversity. Specifically, that counterposition has been formulated here in terms of a reflexive cinematic and cultural practice -- an active approach to seeing and being in the world -- that seems especially well-suited to the layered complexity of contemporary cinema and cultural diversity confronting policymakers and filmgoers alike. Not all films, nor festivals, should strive self-consciously for reflexiveness. Amidst its celebrations of Indian Ocean regional identities and social life, though, ZIFF 2003 highlighted the important challenge of those wishing to advance understanding of culture and cinema by articulating frameworks for necessarily contingent and dynamic notions of diversity.

90 Dhow culture Dialogues
NOTES:

1 My thanks to Professor Abdul Sheriff for his original invitation to present an earlier version of this paper at the 2005 ZIFF Workshop. I am also grateful for his subsequent editorial suggestions as well as the perceptive responses and queries of the other Workshop participants.

2 The complexity of issues related to diversity, especially as a topic for sustained intercultural analysis, has contributed to the establishment of a collaborative (post)graduate program on 'diversity studies' between New York University and University of Cape Town.

3 The status of the document as 'declaration' signifies that it is meant as a recommendation to member states; based on the document, however, a more legally binding "convention" on cultural diversity has subsequently been drafted and, as of mid-2005, is being circulated to member states for review. My brief comments here are indebted to the incisive analysis of Alexander Leicht; see Leicht, 'From Cultural Theory to Cultural Politics and Back: Analyzing the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity,' Paper Presented at 'Globalization, Americanization, and Contemporary Popular Culture' Conference, Istanbul, 22.5. 2004.


6 Charles Tilly, 'Introduction: Violence Viewed and Reviewed,' *Social Research* 67.3 (Fall 2000).


9 A further set of questions, related to those about the public sphere, has to do with the national. While we might rightly suggest that even amidst claims about sub-national or regional or transnational communities, the national remains a stubbornly persistent frame of reference. How does international or otherwise non-local recognition and reception contribute to the largely national cultural dynamics that remain a primary focus of production and exhibition (consider the classification of films even at ZIFF by country of origin as well as director); while international success seems to afford important revenue and production opportunities, how do either a local film-going public or the censors respond to international reception?

10 The following account of ZIFF 2003 re-works some material from my review of that festival that appeared in Senses of Cinema 28 (Sept-Oct 2003); www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/ festivals/03/28/zanzibar.html.

11 For additional details on the Workshop's rich discussions, and its place in the longer history of ZIFF Workshops, see Professor Abdul Sheriff, 'ZIFF Workshops on the Dhow Culture: A Historical Review and an Assessment,' *ZIFF Journal* 1.1 (2004): 59-73.