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# On Pan-Africanism, the preservation of African film heritage and his own work. Interview with Mohamed Challouf

On April 11, 2025, in collaboration with the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Ponrepo Cinema hosted a programme focused on the Tunisian film heritage and relations between Tunisia and Czechoslovakia not only in film. Tunisian film *Shadow of the Earth* (1982) by Taïeb Louhichi, which is in the NFA collection, was complemented by Czechoslovak-Tunisian co-production *Islands in the Desert* (1980) directed by Abdelhafidh Bouassida and A. F. Šulc, a lecture by historian Jan Koura, and the documentary film *Tahar Chéríaa: À l'Ombre du Baobab* about the founder of the first African film festival in Carthage. The film's author – Tunisian director, producer and film curator Mohamed Challouf – attended the screening online.

**What role did the environment you grew up in play in your decision to pursue filmmaking?**

Not only did Tunisia organise the first film festival in the whole Arab and African world – Journées cinématographiques de Carthage (JCC) in 1966 – but it was home to two prestigious film institutions. One of them was the Tunisian Federation of Amateur Filmmakers (La Fédération Tunisienne des Cinéastes Amateurs) which taught people how to make amateur films. And the other was The Tunisian Federation of Film Clubs (La Fédération Tunisienne des Ciné-Clubs) which was a big organisation focused on

education through images. It served all film enthusiasts who could watch classic and original films. The federation had over thirty clubs in almost all Tunisian cities. This activity dated back to the French colonial era and the Tunisians continued it after the country won independence. One day, my friend and I were walking through Sousse and came across a group of young people who were preparing a photography exhibition. I was curious about what they were doing. They told us that they take photos and are members of an amateur film club. We asked them if we could join or simply watch them. They agreed so I joined the club and my passion for film was born. I took an interest in African and Arab cinema after I attended the JCC in Carthage. Later, during my studies in Italy, I followed my passion and started organising festivals.

### **When did you first meet Tahar Chéria and his work?**

I used to see him at the festival in Carthage, but a proper meeting took place in 1985 when I visited the Panafrican Film Festival in Ouagadougou (FESPACO). The people there are more friendly, relaxed and everything is more informal... It's easier to make contacts and friends. That's where I first actually met this patriarch and founder of the Carthage festival. I had a black-and-white camera with me and it was then that I took the first portrait that later appeared in my film *Ouaga, capitale du cinéma* (2000). It was a portrait of Tahar Chéria and Samba Gadjigo face to face in a friendly conversation. I approached him, started asking questions and talked to him about his love for African cinema and his friendship with African film pioneers such as Ousmane Sembène from Senegal, Moussa Hamidou from Niger, Lionel Ngakane from South Africa and Desiré Ecaré from Côte d'Ivoire. Each festival night, these pioneers of African cinema would meet at a specific place called 'the baobab' (as the tree). It was almost a sacred place and young people were virtually forbidden to go there. Only the experienced filmmakers would gather there and we young people couldn't approach them. But I had a small privilege: they would use me to fetch them drinks and refreshments so I had the opportunity to get close to them, get to know them and talk to them.

### **What motivated you to make a film about Tahar Chéria?**

The new generation doesn't know our pioneers and that our cinema was born from struggle since the very beginning. The first films they made were activist films. These

pioneers did wonders because they started from scratch – they had no technique, no film education and no awareness of the importance of communication through images. They had to make a lot of effort to get into film. Some, like Samba and the renowned Malian director Souleymane Cissé, went to study all the way to Russia. Many studied in France. They made great sacrifices. They decided to use film not for entertainment, but rather as a tool to help liberate African nations after the end of colonisation. They wanted original auteur films that would help African people to rely on themselves and develop in a society that traditionally didn't allow it.

Tahar Chériaa, the founder of the JCC, was a spiritual father not just for me. He opened Tunisia to Africa and the whole world. I think it all started with the first black-and-white archive photo of Tahar Chéria and Samba Gadjig. It was the first impulse that made me decide to make a film in honour of the man who opened Tunisia to the world and established a dialogue between North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite being on the same continent, we barely know each other. We harbour the same prejudices against each other and that constitutes a big obstacle for mutual understanding and collaboration between the north, center and south of Africa. I wanted to show that Tahar Chéria wasn't a loner, but that he existed in a network of relationships with other film pioneers who helped him and who believed in the power of image as a means to overcome the colonial past.

**You speak of Tahar Chéria with great respect. What was your collaboration like?**

As Tahar grew older, I would travel to Ouagadougou with him, accompanied him and took care of him. We became friends, we were almost like father and son. Towards the end of his life, Tahar Chériaa was dissatisfied because the filming was taking too long. I didn't have enough funds so I would interrupt the film production and he grew impatient. He would tell me: 'You've been filming me for almost twenty years and you still haven't finished!' He even threatened to sue me and forbid me from finishing the film. So I had to hurry. Luckily, before his death, we held a screening of a twenty-six-minute version in progress. It was presented at the Carthage festival. He was there and the audience honoured him with long applause. He died two weeks after the screening. In 2011, we screened those 26 minutes at the Cannes festival. But due to financing and archive footage, the entire film premiered in 2015.

In his last years, Tahar was also very demanding and strict to people who didn't keep their promises and deadlines. And I think he was also bitter about what happened with JCC. The festival he founded started to change. It was no longer a place for auteur films and enlightenment, it became a festival of red carpet, stars and superficiality. And that wasn't what he and his colleagues envisioned.

**When and how did your interest in archiving film begin? Was it a gradual process or was there a specific moment that sparked your interest?**

The real interest developed when I started regularly visiting the Il Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna. I don't care much for the festivals in Cannes and Venice, but I never skip the Bologna festival, as every year, film archives from the entire world gather there to present films from their collections. And that's what I'm really interested in – also because of the festival I organise in Tunisia, Ciné-Musées. It was also in Bologna where I first attended the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF) Congress.

Scouring the archives became my passion. I'm not an archivist or an expert, but I learned on the go. It started when I produced a film titled *Anastasia di Bizerta* about 'White Russians' [Note: Russians who escaped the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution] who came to Tunisia in 1920. It was a low-budget film I produced. Its director needed lots of footage and we couldn't afford to hire an archivist or someone specialising in searching archives. So I started doing it myself, looking for archive footage, photographs, documents... I became a documentarist.

I searched in archives in France, at old newspaper sellers and Italian sources. I got access to an enormous amount of material. I realised I was good at it so I continued to do it for my following films such as *Ouaga, capital du cinéma* and *À l'ombre du baobab*. I learned how film archives work and how they preserve films. I made friends with people from the Bologna Film Archive and thanks to that I got access to other archives of the International Federation of Film Archives. I think there is no better person to look for archive footage than the director himself – because he knows exactly what he's looking for.

**The archive footage you used in *À l'ombre du baobab* comes from existing African archives or did you have to use archives outside of Africa?**

The archive footage related to Tahar Chérifa I used in *À l'ombre du baobab* comes mostly from African filmmakers and from African cultural heritage. Every year, or at least every other year, the festival in Carthage made a film about the whole event, just like the festival in Ouagadougou. Most of the archive footage comes from African films that were originally shot on film and that I later transferred to digital. The film also includes lots of footage I filmed myself. If you look at it closely, you will find archive footage in Super 8, VHS, 8 mm – basically every possible format, because whenever I had a camera on me, I used it.

### **What do you see as the biggest challenge of film archiving in Africa?**

The biggest problem is that the governments don't realise the importance of preserving this kind of cultural heritage. They don't allocate budgets to it. Another problem is the actual search and mapping of these films because the responsible people often don't have a clue where the films are located and are not familiar with film heritage at all. There are no lists of films that have been made. It's necessary to identify the films, localise them and gain access. Then we need to find ways to digitise them and make them accessible for new generations. A huge challenge is also founding new film archives in Africa, which would take care of the cultural heritage, conduct research and establish collaboration with other FIAF institutions.

In Africa, it's very hard to store film negatives because of the heat. The conditions for proper storage such as humidity and microclimate are very difficult to achieve. The films, therefore, often end in foreign laboratories. But then we need to make agreements with these laboratories, otherwise the governments lose their rights to do anything with the films – they cannot get them back, analyse them, obtain the rights. This results in a kind of withholding of our cultural heritage, sort of a 'kidnapping' of our archives, where both those who are supposed to take care of the films in Africa and the laboratories where the films are stored are complicit.

Furthermore, our filmmakers often lack funds and awareness that they should take care of their archives. Today, most new films are made digitally, but not even digital formats are stored properly – we don't have professional servers, our work remains saved on external drives, DVDs etc., which are very fragile and not permanent media. This all shows the urge to realise that we have to do something.

I think this is also the task of film archives from the countries in the global North. Because every time when for instance Tunisia or Burkina Faso loses a single shot from its cinematography, the whole world loses it. Preservation of cultural heritage is the responsibility of everyone – North and South. The films have to be preserved and stored in multiple archive centres.

Take me, for instance. When I send one of my films for a screening, I ask the local film archive to keep a copy. Because I can be sure it will be preserved. But not everyone sees it in the same way – some fear their films could be misused without their consent. But I think the role of film archives is to preserve heritage and every time a film goes somewhere, its copy should remain there.

When we speak of 60 years of African cinema, it means 60 years of production – a huge amount of material and work needed to be done to preserve it. But it's becoming increasingly difficult. The more years pass, the more expensive, demanding and urgent it becomes. New generations and people in charge need to realise that this is a task that must be accomplished – perhaps with the help of those who have more resources. Because otherwise it will become increasingly impossible. If films are not properly stored, their content disappears.

### **How difficult is it to access archive footage from African films?**

The situation is really dramatic. Many African countries have no access to their own archives. Film negatives are stored in Europe and some even in former Soviet countries. Guinea, for instance, due to its bad relations with France, sent its films to be developed in former Yugoslavia, and these films remained there. Foreign laboratories charge enormous amounts for the release of the materials. Tunisia and Morocco don't have this problem because they established their own film laboratories for processing current events. So they keep the film negatives in their own countries, although often in poor conditions. But at least they're here!

For me, preserving film heritage is a big topic. And one of our main goals is to save it for future generations through collaboration with European archives. Young people have no access to film heritage because everything is abroad and there are often no digital copies.

Moreover, no one really screens 35mm or 16mm films because the projectors didn't survive. There are only three or four specialised cinemas on the entire African continent equipped for this. And not even these cinemas have the proper technical equipment. This is a huge problem. And the worst thing is that African countries and their political elites don't realise how important this heritage is. They don't invest in its preservation; they don't care about it. That's why my friends and I have founded the Ciné-Sud Patrimoine association which collaborates with film archives in Europe – for example in Toulouse, Poland, Lisbon, Brussels and Berlin. I also established contact with the National Film Archive in Prague. We started discussing Tunisian films made at FAMU and a possible collaboration on preserving co-production between Tunisia and former Czechoslovakia. We also collaborate with Martin Scorsese's foundation and the Film Archive in Bologna. Recently, we restored a Senegalese film which was subsequently screened in the Cannes Classic section at the Cannes Festival. It is precisely civic associations like ours that are trying to do something – because countries aren't doing anything. Our film pioneers are dying and often leave no information on the whereabouts of their film negatives. Search for these materials then becomes even more complicated.

In 2015, we also founded the first festival in Africa and the Arab world dedicated to film heritage. We named it Ciné-Musée and it takes place in the city of Sousse. This festival promotes restored films from Africa, Arab countries and countries from all over the world. We screen films from Tunisia, Africa, Italy and also silent films with live music. For example, we screened the famous Turkish film *Yo/* which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. The festival tries to raise the awareness of the importance of film heritage. Even with limited resources, we collaborate with many institutions that lend us film so we could introduce them to today's audiences and film enthusiasts.

**Do you think then African and Arab cinema has been gaining more recognition in the world? What challenges does African cinema face?**

I think that thanks to digital technologies, the production output increases, but the quality decreases. North Africa is much more present at big festivals and their films circle the world. Sub-Saharan Africa is facing difficulties, it no longer has the same opportunities it had in the past. In the past, considerable funds were allocated to the support of cinema, established filmmakers received contributions from the European

Union, France and others. But the support has decreased significantly. New generation is therefore operating with limited funds, but most of their films are intended for local audiences only. Technically and qualitatively, they don't meet international standards.

The number of cinemas is decreasing, in Tunisia, we lost about 165 cinemas, there are only about 20 now. In countries like Mali and Cameroon, they only have one or two cinemas. The film market in these countries is virtually non-existent. Low-budget films and series are made and films are usually watched on computer screens. Original African films are distributed mainly in the places they were filmed, which is very dangerous for African film. The number of cinemas and big production has decreased, no one cares much about the technical aspects of the films, direction or acting. We are gradually losing the intensity that African cinema gained in the past with great masterpieces such as films by Ousmane Sembène, Idrissa Ouédraogo and Abderrahman Sissako. These great directors made amazing films that achieved success and won awards. Similar films are no longer being made because it requires a lot of money, and that money is not available anymore. Some countries, like Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal, have their own funds to support local cinema, just like Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. But in other countries, films are made with sponsor money or require investment from the filmmakers themselves.

**What would you recommend to Czech film fans who would like to get to know more about African cinema?**

The essential thing is to have access to these films. I think that the Czech Republic should strive to make African films accessible. It's important that young Czechs learn more about African cinema. In the media, Africa is often portrayed in a prejudiced and negative way, it's therefore important to know about these films. Africa is a vast continent with incredibly rich cultural heritage and film is an excellent medium for discovering these cultures. It is important to organise more events in collaboration with African partners to raise awareness of African cinema because prejudice and disrespect for others arise from ignorance. When we don't know something, we become ignorant and create wrong notions of other people. Film is an excellent tool for getting to know each other and discovering African cultures. Unfortunately, recent Sub-Saharan films are not always of high quality and most of them don't make



it into international distribution. Fortunately, we have film heritage, which should be a part of festivals and other events. I believe that it's important to visit festivals, like the one in Bologna, see what's going on there, choose films and introduce them to new generations. I think restoration projects are important for preserving the memory for today's young people and raising awareness of these films.

I was surprised that many young Tunisians were artistically formed in the Czech Republic. They studied and made their first films there. Later, they for instance founded the Tunisian television. I'm really interested in this topic and I look forward to exploring this bridge between Tunisia and the Czech Republic.