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AGAINST ALL ODDS FILMMAKING IN SUDAN

Rhea Schmitt



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“There are four obstacles to film and photography in Sudan. The sun, the society, the government and the government.”

Ali Mohamed Osman

Professor of Photography at Sudan University for Science and Technology

Filmmaking in Sudan has a long but difficult history due to the continuous political and economic challenges. Despite that, there are critically acclaimed films, some of which were recently restored by the *Arsenal Institut für Film und Videokunst e.V.* and screened at the *Berlinale*. Three recently produced films by Sudanese filmmakers are currently touring film festivals: the drama *I Will Die at 20* by Amjad Abu Alala and the documentaries *Khartoum Offside* by Marwa Zain and Suhaib Gasmelbari's *Talking about Trees*, which tells the story of four filmmakers trying to reopen a cinema in Sudan.

In my Master's thesis, I focused on the motivations and aspirations that drive filmmakers and media creators, the role of access to training, as well as the impact of technological developments and the changing political situation of filmmaking. As little research has been conducted on filmmaking between 2000 and 2015, Sudanese filmmaker colleagues strongly suggested focusing on this period. I conducted 34 interviews with different groups of film professionals, varying in age, political and personal backgrounds, career trajectories and production contexts. For instance filmmakers working within the system, like Ibrahim Saehoon, who use those means to create within the restrictive boundaries, as well as those fighting the system and working independently like the members of the *Sudanese Film Group* (SFG) - a

group of foreign trained filmmakers active before the regime came into power. Other filmmakers work for international organizations producing educational films, like Mia Bittar and Alyaa Siralkhatim, while some filmmakers maintain their day jobs in completely different fields and choose to make their films with their own money and free time, like Razan Hashim. Finally, I also worked with filmmakers who left to study abroad and returned, like Suhaib Gasmelbari, for example.

After 10 years of totalitarian dictatorial regime, filmmaking and media production outside of war propaganda had come to a halt. However, the dynamics began to change due to a shift in technology and politics in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Satellite TV entered Sudan and enabled people to watch more than just state television. Filmmaking technology became more affordable and with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the South in 2005, Sudan moved into the focus of international interest and press. Combined, these events triggered a modest but important opening of the media landscape. Filmmakers and media professionals, who had left the country in the early 1990s, returned from abroad, established filmmakers started exploring potential new avenues of production, and foreign news producers and filmmakers entered Sudan. During the same period, the *Sudanese Film Group* resumed their meetings to educate young filmmakers. They also began collaborating on films. In 2009, film curator Tilal Afifi founded the *Sudan Film Factory*, a collaborative project with the Goethe-Institut, which provided basic practical film training to aspiring filmmakers. Nowadays, the *Sudan Film Factory* is an independent institution that supports, educates and collaborates with filmmakers and created the first *Sudanese Independent Film Festival* (SIFF). This improved public access to films, which had been previously mainly limited to foreign cultural centers. The SIFF and the festivals that followed shortly after created an additional motivation for filmmakers to produce films and enabled them to interact with international colleagues, learning from them and vice versa. In addition, more multi-media courses were introduced at various universities which brought forth some successful filmmakers. The arrival of the internet not only provided access to a wider range of films but also to informal film education, either through official online courses or DIY YouTube channels. These developments led to an increase in people working in the field of film productions. One of the main motivations that drive Sudanese filmmakers is to create their

own narratives, for national and international audiences, whatever the format. They do not see themselves and their cultures represented in international media or on state television. As established filmmaker Mia Bittar pointed out, their approach of trial and error, despite governmental and infrastructural restrictions, inspired her and others to find solutions around restrictions for their own ambitious productions.

Curator Afifi described filmmaking in Sudan as a baby that just left the incubator doing its first steps on its own. Seeing the various high-quality productions generated during Al Bashir's regime and over the last months - **DURING AS WELL AS FROM WITHIN THE REVOLUTION** - it is certain that filmmakers in Sudan will continue to build their film industry with whatever means available.



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About the Author:

Rhea Schmitt completed her MA in African History at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (2017) after working as a filmmaker in Sudan for three years. She collaborated with Sudanese colleagues on various productions and is working with the *Sudan Film Factory* on the publication of her thesis in English and Arabic.



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