

Case Study: Burkina Faso Newsreel Collection

Andrea McCarty

MIT 6 Conference - April 2009

In the late 1990s, Patrice Napon, a film archivist in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, rescued hundreds of 16mm newsreels from a dumpster in the parking lot of a local television station. The TV station had updated its technology to video, and in its coverage of current events, it no longer had a use for the films. Napon realized the value of the reels without even examining them or viewing them. The newsreels contain footage shot by local film crews just after Burkina Faso declared independence from the French in the 1960s; they feature images of urban life, rural life, local events and national and regional political leaders. Commissioned by the new government, the footage bears witness to events and daily life just after independence. It also represents the efforts of the nation to document its own government and citizenry, and to put its own people behind the camera after decades of colonial rule. Part propaganda, part documentary and part industrial film, these newsreels represent some of the only moving images from this time period in Burkina Faso's history.

Background:

While a graduate student in the Comparative Media Studies program at MIT, I received a grant from the MIT Public Service Center to travel to Ouagadougou, where I volunteered at the African Film Library (La Cinémathèque Africaine) and was able to work with some of the newsreel films rescued by Napon. The African Film Library was founded in 1989 as part of FESPACO, a French acronym for the PanAfrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou. FESPACO is a biannual film festival devoted to African film and African film production; the 21st festival was held in Ouagadougou in February 2009. The African Film Library operates as a branch of the larger FESPACO organization, and receives funding through its parent, which in turn receives funding from the government of Burkina Faso as well as other foreign sources.

The Library holds over 700 films, in addition to videotape on a variety of aging formats. Their holdings are comprised of 35mm fiction films by West African and other African filmmakers; 16mm newsreel and documentary films shot in the West African region after independence from

France; educational and hygiene films shot by French and West African filmmakers from the colonial period up to the present day. The majority of these films are held in the Library's vaults, where conditions are approximately 60 degrees Fahrenheit and 40% relative humidity. There is no air exchange in the vault, but the vault climate is an improvement over the outdoor climate that ranges from 75 degrees Fahrenheit to 100 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on the time of year. While funding is scarce, the film vault represents a major step forward for the archive, nominally slowing the decay of the audiovisual elements, which are adversely affected by high temperatures and high humidity. The FESPACO offices have recently relocated to a new central building, but the film vault will remain as is.

Financial resources are scarce, and the Film Library does not have the means to preserve or copy any of the films in their collection. Scholars and researchers occasionally visit the Library, and the staff does their best to provide these researchers with access to information and to the films in the vault. The African Film Library has held intermittent membership in FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives), but has not always been able to keep up with FIAF's onerous dues. While FIAF is an organization dedicated to the preservation of film as cultural heritage, it is primarily comprised of the world's leading archives in industrialized nations. It does not serve the needs of struggling institutions in the developing world that face great challenges in day-to-day operations and basic needs.

When I was at the Film Library in 2004, there were approximately five staff members and several volunteers. One archivist is in charge of the film collection, and he received his formal training through the FIAF Summer Program at the George Eastman House in 2002. He is looking after the film to the best of his abilities, but does not receive adequate recognition or support from the larger FESPACO organization, where the focus remains on the biannual film festival. The Film Library lacks basic necessities such as splicing tape, archival cans and folders to house papers related to the film collection. Many of the films are in need of recanning and removal from their original rusty metal canisters.

The Films:

While volunteering at the Film Library, my tasks included the creation of a searchable collections database in FileMaker Pro, and the inspection and repair of the newsfilm collection mentioned above. Napon, the Archivist at the Film Library, knew the collection was at risk and had already separated out the worst of the reels. I rehoused the films in newly donated plastic cans and wound them on new cores. I found that the collection was decaying due to vinegar syndrome, with shrinkage a problem in most reels. The surviving magnetic soundtracks were severely compromised. The whole newsreel collection needed to be stored separately from the rest of the Library's films. With advancing vinegar syndrome, the newsreel films were at risk to contaminate the other films in the vault.

The newsreel collection is in dire need of preservation or copying, but no money exists for such a project. Three reels were preserved in 2005 through a generous donation of services by Colorlab Film Laboratory in Bethesda, Maryland. Russ Suniewick generously donated time, effort and film stock to copy three films onto 16mm film. The possibility of saving the remainder of the collection remains uncertain.

The three films chosen by Napon for copying are valuable historical documents from 1960s Burkina Faso. "The Celebration of the 3rd Anniversary of Independence" (August, 1963) reflects the newly-formed government's penchant for military displays and grand parades. The camera captures government officials assembling for the celebration and tracks the parade through the streets of Ouagadougou. "Women's Meeting in Ouagadougou" documents a women's meeting led by First Lady Yameogo in one of the squares of the capitol city. Sadly, the soundtrack to the meeting remains unpreserved, but the visual images of the Burkinabé women, many with infants in tow, are compelling. Perhaps the most important film of the three is titled "Funeral in Bissa Country," and the footage contains scenes of traditional funeral rites among the Bissa people. The Bissa ethnic group is native to southern Burkina Faso, as well as parts of Ghana and Togo. The camera crew was given surprising access to the religious rites, including a scene of animal sacrifice. One could surmise that the crew was given this access because it was comprised of native Burkinabés instead of foreigners. Taken together, these three films highlight the richness of the entire collection of newsreels, which capture a variety of official gatherings and

happenings, and a handful of scenes of religious rituals and daily life in the capitol city and across the country. An important step to be undertaken by Film Library staff will be the cataloguing of the names, dates and places captured on film, so that the context can be more fully understood and researched in the future.

Challenges for Cultural Preservation in the Context of Developing Nations:

I was given a grant by the MIT Public Service Center because I was able to make a case for film preservation and archiving as a public service to the community. During my stay in Ouagadougou, I found there to be little general awareness of the African Film Library and its activities within the greater community I encountered. The energies of the government, humanitarian organizations and international funders were directed elsewhere. The native professionals and foreign volunteers that I encountered most frequently were midwives, teachers, nurses, pharmacists, doctors, farmers and public policy specialists. Outside of FESPACO, I never came across anyone working professionally in the cultural sector, and sometimes found myself on the defensive for not volunteering to do work that was more "useful." A Burkinabé acquaintance once asked me why I was not there to "help." Immersed in the harsh realities of day-to-day existence, many people understandably overlooked the importance of preserving the region's cultural heritage.

The realities of the working conditions at the Film Library were discouraging, with basic improvements needed to the workplace infrastructure. Colleagues were in need of support and further training. A lack of means and a web of bureaucracy sapped energy from new projects and ideas. The Film Library staff were given an enormous responsibility to protect the films in their care, but were frustrated as they watched them decay before their eyes. Support from the international archival community would certainly benefit the Library, and would allow the staff to more successfully connect to the larger community of moving image archivists, many of whom face similar challenges in preserving collections. Monetary support and grants would allow them to take action to preserve some of the films in their care, but even a measure of greater connection could make a difference to the motivation and pride that the staff takes in their work.

While individual projects like mine can achieve some short-term goals, several organizations within the archiving community are working to set up models for formal partnerships between archives in developing nations and those in the industrialized world. UNESCO has undertaken some cultural preservation and heritage projects, but there are organizations that are focused solely on the field of archiving. Archivists Without Borders is devoted to cooperative projects in the field of archival sciences. The International Council on Archives (ICA) has created an Archival Solidarity Project, which aims to coordinate international projects and to develop tools and models that can be used and shared across these projects. Finally, the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) formed an International Outreach Task Force in 2004 to explore programs and projects targeted towards archives with at-risk collections. This focus on sharing information and developing models of cooperation can take the field much further than any one project undertaken by a lone archivist. This new-found focus on cooperation, partnership and volunteerism has raised awareness of the threat to film collections, archival collections and historical documents across the world. The only question is whether we can do enough to save these cultural artifacts before it is too late.

Resources:

FESPACO: <http://www.fespaco.bf/>

Archivists Without Borders: <http://www.arxiv.org/en/index.php>

Archival Solidarity: <http://archives3.concordia.ca/Solidarity/default.html>

AMIA International Outreach Task Force:

<http://www.amianet.org/groups/taskforces/outreach/outreach.php>