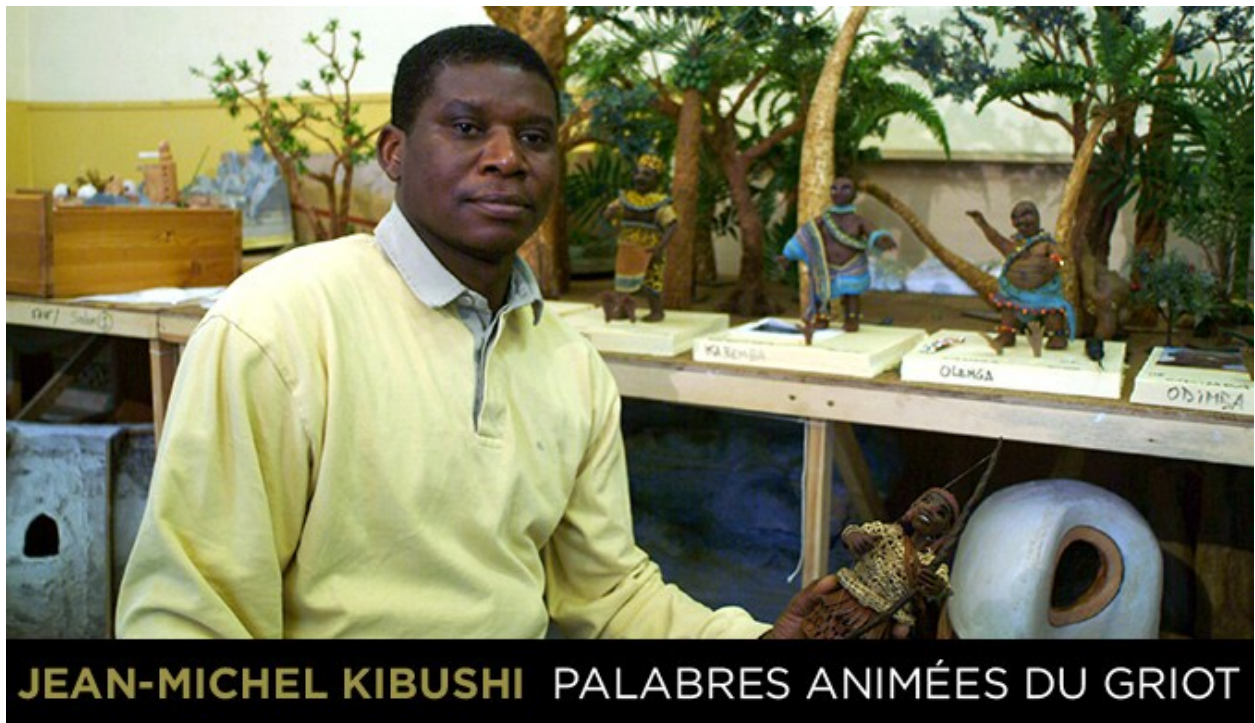


Animating the DRC: An Interview with Congolese Animator Jean-Michel Kibushi

by

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<http://der.org/community/news>



Widely considered a pioneering artist in the field of animation in Central Africa, Jean-Michel Kibushi has assumed a vastly important role in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), his home country. In 1991, Kibushi made his first stop-motion film based on a tale from his own ethnic group, the Tetela, titled *Le Crapaud Chez Ses Beaux-Parents* (The Toad Visits His In-Laws). Since then, he has worked to teach and encourage animation amongst local artists and youth in the region. With the creation of Studio Malembe Maa (which means “slowly but surely” in Lingala), the first local mobile studio for animation, he continues to undertake socially motivated work with an educational and developmental agenda.

Paula Callus (PC): To begin, could you explain how you developed a special interest for the art of animation?

Jean-Michel Kibushi (JMK): This interest emerged while I was studying theater and film at the National Arts Institute in Kinshasa in 1985. I had decided I wanted to go beyond the theoretical study of these subjects, and I was driven to discover the practice of cinema. At the time, the French Cultural Centre in Kinshasa offered a range of workshops where I was able to gain this practical experience and use of proper equipment. Here, I discovered the classic films screened during the meetings of a film club I had joined. By 1988, I had a voluntary internship at the Centre Wallonie of Bruxelles where I could put this knowledge to use, alongside the Belgian animators from the studio Atelier Graphoui, who specialize in animation.

This first experience of animation, as stop-motion, frame by frame, shooting with a 16mm Bolex, seduced me! In effect, I had identified that animation was a means to add value, promote and preserve our traditional culture. Certainly, in theater one could transmit this but it would be short-lived, and one would need to invest so much time for a few performances. In animation, the artist is allowed a continuation of the work, a wider dissemination... and the possibility to resonate with an international audience.

PC: What are your first memories of animated films in your youth in the DRC?

JMK: I have no recollection of cinematographic projections in my childhood, because I lived in a rural country where there was no cinema or television. It wasn't until college that we sporadically had some screenings of documentary films. It was only when I was a student in Kinshasa that I discovered the Kimbo series on television.

PC: What kind of stories are you interested in? Are they an inspiration for your own work?

JMK: My heritage, traditions, legends, rituals, and tales are the main inspiration for my work. This was the case for *The Toad Visits His In-Laws* and *Prince Loseno* and continues to be so in my current film *Ngando* which is in development. This is the basis of my work because, in my opinion, the African soul and for that matter the soul of each culture, rests on a heritage that shows us who we are, where we come from, our roots.

PC: In your opinion, what does the technique of cut-out, under the camera, animation offer an artist in comparison to the more conventional drawn or cell animation?



JMK: The classic cartoon utilizes a technique that requires a steady team of animators (for a 1-minute animation, for example it takes 1440 drawings). Since I am not a draftsman, the paper-cut technique allowed me to realize the characters quickly, and to animate the characters directly under the camera on a bench. Although this technique has limits with the breakdown of movement (walking, expressions of the face, mouth,

and arms), it is more accessible than drawn or cell animation, and still a very expressive form.

PC: Beyond your own work as an artist, you have been described as a cultural promoter for the art of animation in Central and East Africa’s Great Lakes region and the DRC. Can you explain your role?

JMK: I am one of the few animation filmmakers in Central Africa. Our region is characterized by a virtual absence of productions for the youth. The national television channels of our countries do not produce and import programs, so it is important to have local productions with themes that allow identification with our cultural referents, rather than to bring to our youth the dreams carried by heroes distant and unidentified. My struggle is to train artists in the region so that we can tell our stories and share them with the rest of the world.

PC: Could you talk about the “Afriqu’Anim’Action” project? How was it organized?

JMK: Afriqu’Anim’Action, is a professional training course that supports young talented creators ready to take up the challenge of developing professional animation films. Quality animation requires substantial investment in resources, equipment, education, and animation technicians and professional assistance to enable its production and development. The workshops took place in the form of long-term residences in Burundi and Congo Kinshasa.

For a population of more than 120 million (Central and Eastern Africa), in a region where the plastic and dramatic arts are immensely rich, there are to date less than a dozen professional animation filmmakers and some amateur studios. Our training, in a simple and adaptable method, provided participants with working tools and opened up new paths to artists wishing to undertake the production of animated films. The adventure was finding out whilst doing, so to speak; adapting to the African realities, the complex social and cultural environment, and the needs and interests of the trainees.

PC: After four years of training, what were the results of this project?

JMK: It was a long-term project that we carried out in two stages. It was a challenge to convert artists into animation professionals: to train them in the various aspects and related practices in animation production, from writing to making films. After the workshops, the second stage of the project was to help promoters to make their own short films. Afriqu' Anim'Action resulted in the production of 9 short films. Since the end of the project another three short films have been produced in Kinshasa and some artists have collaborated on advertising projects or documentaries with animated sequences.



Animator and filmmaker Jean-Michel Kibushi

PC: And finally Jean, in 2008 I travelled with you to Kinshasa to begin the development and pre-production of a stop-motion film, Ngando, which you mentioned earlier. You gave a presentation to the artists and various dignitaries, and explained how you thought it would take at least another 8 years to produce this film. Everyone was shocked to think it would take so long...but as you explained, stop-motion was a labour of love. Can you tell us about this film and your ambitions for it now?

JMK: My ambition with this work is to bring the mythical and fantastic world of a place in Africa, where tradition and modernity meet, to a wider audience. Fighting tyranny, defending rights and access to basic needs such as water and electricity, safeguarding cultural heritage, are all values that are conveyed within this film. My hope is that this dream will succeed.

Why does it take so long and why is it so complex to make this film? Alongside the scriptwriting, I tried to take an atypical path, contrary to classical production method. This project was not only for me to make a film, but also to serve as a means to train young people in the craft of animation. The trainings in Kinshasa during the film's development benefited from the participation of many experienced professionals from Africa, Europe and Russia. In particular, Olaf Trenk, a German artist, trained young people in the creation of characters (frames, molding, drawings) and Thalia Diane Lane, a British artist, supervised training with dolls, costumes, and accessories. These two artists have been part of film crews including *Frankenweenie* (Best Animated Film Oscar for 2013) by Tim Burton, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* by Wes Anderson, *The Sandman* (*Das Sandmännchen*) by Sinem Sakaoglu, and others.

Unlike the productions of the major studios who combine the necessary resources with precise development on a tight production schedule, the absence of development financing kept us from adhering to a strict timetable. Nevertheless, we managed without great financial means to develop the project, and without any artistic constraints or dictates of a financial partner. Today, with a solid script structure and a finalized aesthetic developed through pre-production (such as storyboard, characters, sets, puppets, etc.) I am seeking financial partners to set up the business plan for production.

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