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Ngozi Onwurah; Women with Open Eyes by Anne-Laure Folly

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| <b>AFRICA</b> |
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**These Hands.** Produced by Dieter Schelling and Flora M'mbugu-Schelling; written and directed by Flora M'mbugu-Schelling. 1992; color; 45 minutes. Kiswahili and Kimakonde with English subtitles.

**Monday's Girls.** Produced by Lloyd Gardner; written and directed by Ngozi Onwurah. 1993; color; 50 minutes. Waikiriki and English, with English subtitles.

**Femmes aux yeux ouverts** [Women with Open Eyes]. Produced, written, and directed by Anne-Laure Folly. 1994; color; 52 minutes. French with English subtitles. All three films are distributed by California Newsreel, 149 Ninth St., San Francisco, Calif. 94103 (415) 621-6196.

These three films present many different views of the experiences of African women in varying locations—geographically, socially, economically, and culturally—by three African women directors. Flora M'mbugu-Schelling is a Tanzanian, Ngozi Onwurah an Anglo-Nigerian, and Anne-Laure Folly a Togolese. In keeping with their diversity, each has a radically different take on the subject matter.

*These Hands* focuses exclusively on a group of Mozambican refugee women in Tanzania, working in a quarry breaking rocks by hand into gravel for use in making cement. The camera never departs from this location but looks at every aspect of their activities there in great detail. Their hands are as rugged with scars and cuts as the quarry that surrounds them. There is no narration, nor are there many subtitles; only the women's occasional songs are translated from Kimakonde for the benefit of the viewer. These songs limn the outlines of lives both barren and full: homesickness, the death of a co-worker in a cave-in that occurs on-camera, the cherishing of children (who are present at the quarry in significant numbers). The women are of all ages and self-employed, as the sole explanatory text at the end of the film tells us. Their blood drips on the stones from perpetual injuries. Men operate machines at the quarry for an unnamed company. The viewer is left to extrapolate meaning to a large extent; an informed knowledge of the workings of the international capitalist economy in a peripheral "socialist" manifestation is helpful to interpretation, as is some political history to explain why these women are there in the first place. Visually, the film is presentable but not spectacular. It is neither irretrievably grim, due to the women's hardiness and spirit, nor is it falsely optimistic with visions of "empowerment." The choice of subject determines all. It is also not historically informative, although it could be made so by a presenter's explication.

*Monday's Girls* is a more conventional work that explores the experience of *iriabos*, teenage initiates, in an island town of southeastern Nigeria. It is in Waikiriki with English subtitles and English, with an occasional interpellation by a British woman narrator. Much of the film is in the voices of the participants, including that of Monday Moses, the senior woman in charge of the initiates. Contrary to the usual rap in this country about puberty rites for African women, this area is typical of Africa in that female genital mutilation is not practiced. Unfortunately, this will make the film less compelling to the increasing number of American viewers whose interests in African women are confined to that subject. In effect, in this film, "traditions" are problematized by disagreement among potential initiates over their importance. A key aspect is the story of one prospective initiate—older than the rest and an urban migrant—who was persuaded by her

father, a local dignitary, to return in order to participate. She refuses to do so fully and goes back to the city, thus breaching her relationship with her father and bringing public disgrace on her family.

Her voice contrasts sharply with that of a willing initiate who meets all of the requisite criteria and graduates with a certificate to show for her performance. Although she receives the knowledge imparted by Monday and other older women, this woman also plans to continue her formal education in order to secure a good job to support her future children. The voices of the participants are the most illuminating; the narrator unfortunately overlays a “traditional-modern” dichotomy on the situation, with the token sop at the end that “some traditions still have a place in a changing society.” The content, however, belies that dichotomy at many points. For historians, the syncretic character of what is occurring is most useful, as hip-hop blares from a radio in the girls’ “seclusion” room and the male elders deliberate about the recusant in English, with constant references to their reinvention of “tradition.” Although the film is not intended to be historical, it could be used that way if the paradigm is critiqued by the presenter. Of the three films reviewed here, the visual quality of *Monday’s Girls* is least pleasing; it is somewhat unfocused both in clarity and composition, with some color distortions. The quality was no doubt influenced by its origin as a BBC-TV production.

*Femmes aux yeux ouverts* is visually quite stunning and makes economical use of its fifty-two minutes to cover many aspects of the roles of African women. Although it begins with a poem by a Burkinaabe woman and in Burkina Faso, by the end of the film the viewer has also seen footage from Mali, Senegal, and Benin. It is organized thematically by titles flashed on the screen. Most of the women speak in French, with English subtitles provided. The subjects covered include female genital mutilation (Burkina Faso), forced marriage and lack of property rights (Burkina Faso), AIDS, the struggle against poverty (Senegal, Mali, Benin), and political participation for women (Benin, Burkina Faso). The narration is multivocal, often from activists involved in amelioration of various aspects of women’s situations. Although most of these activists come from the elite, a non-condescending view of the situation of poor women is presented in many contexts; men are heard from occasionally; and the point is made firmly by a marketwoman that by discriminating against women “man is destroying himself.” The tone varies from anger to dispassionate observation, depending on the speaker. Many of the women are eminently quotable, and there is significant footage from the 1991 revolution in Burkina Faso, along with an interview with a participant whose daughter was killed in the women’s demonstration that was a key event. Also included is an extended interview with Mali’s first female governor (of Bamako), who does some of the narration. The film therefore has historical ramifications in several aspects, but, like the others, it is an unintentional historical document, not a historical documentary.

Altogether, these films are excellent contemporary examples of the variety of cinematic talent coming out of Africa devoted to the representation of African women. M’mbugu-Schelling, Onwurah, and Folly are experts in the genre of the informal documentary, with a range of perception from the minute to the wide screen. They have given new meaning to “out of Africa” in their observations of the outsider/“other” status of women paradoxically embedded in locations as varied as quarries, islands, patrilineages, markets, farms, and in occupations old and new, and they have not acquiesced to easy stereotypes in any case. They explore not only conventional but also new frontiers as women move into formerly male-dominated occupations and men into female-dominated ones, and perpetually new cultural combinations are created. Their nuanced approaches belie the easy sensationalism of such fictionalized matter as Alice Walker’s *Warrior Marks* (1993), giving a much more balanced view of a changing situation by giving voice to African women.

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