

Although widely considered a pioneering artist in the field of stop-motion and animation in Central Africa, J. M. Kibushi Ndajte Wooto is an understated man. Always measured and philosophical in his approaches to his art, his films are a reflection of this. That stop-motion is his medium of choice is not incidental. This process requires absolute control of every minutiae and such conscious and considered treatment of the image frame. Moreover Jean Michel is not only an artist in his own right, but critically a cultural proponent for the DRC, a curator and historian for animation from the region.

Kibushi was born in 1957 in Lubefu in the Kasai Oriental region, and grew up in Tshumbe in the DRC. His background is in drama and cinematography with an education from Kinshasa's National Institute of the Arts (INA) between 1985 and 1989. In 1991, he made his first stop-motion film of a Tetela tale, *Le Crapaud Chez Ses Beaux-Parents*. He was isolated in his endeavours as the only animation artist in the DRC at the time. Nevertheless, he continued making work inspired by local narrative whether fictional or real, as in the documentary animation *Septembre Noir* (1992). Perhaps it was this solitary experience that drove him to become an agent of change, promoting the development of animation amongst local artists in the region. As Studio Malembe Maa he continues to undertake socially motivated work with more of an educational and developmental agenda, through creative workshops with young people using local storytelling and theatre and the Caravan Sankuru (a mobile-cinema that travelled the Sankuru region that would otherwise have no access to film or animation).

This interview explores his journey and the challenges he continues to face on his odyssey to transform animation in central Africa.

To begin, could you explain how you developed a special interest for the art of animation?

JM.K: 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.

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

JM.K: 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.

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

JM.K: My heritage, traditions, legends, rituals, and tales are the main inspiration for my work. This was the case for "The Toad at his in-laws" and "Prince Loseno", as continues to be so in my current film "Ngando" which is in development. This is the basis of my work because, according to me, 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.

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?

JM.K: The classic cartoon utilizes a technique that requires a steady team of animators (for a 1-minute animation screen time 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.

Could you describe your production process, from conception to execution, and how you involve local artists in your work?

JM.K: I write the script first, then, during development, I involve local artists in Kinshasa for the creation of the graphic design and a preproduction bible, storyboard and animatic. During the shooting, I oversee the staging of the animation as well as the production.

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

JM.K: 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.

Could you talk about the "Afriqu'Anim'Action" project? How was it organized?

JM.K: 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 assistance of professionals from all the fields to enable the production and development of the field. 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.

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

JM.K: 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.

And finally Jean, in 2008 I travelled with you to Kinshasa to begin the development and pre-production of a stop-motion film, then called Ngando. I remember that 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 to make a feature film ... But as you explained stop-motion was a labour of love. Can you tell us about this film and your ambitions for the film?

JM.K :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 "training for the cinema of animation - development - pre-production" in Kinshasa benefited from the participation of many experienced professionals from Africa of Europe and Russia. In particular, Olaf Trenk, a German artist, trained in the creation of characters (frames, molding, drawings). Thalia Diane Lane, a British artist, supervised training in the costumes of dolls and accessories. These two artists have been part of the film crew such as: Frankenweenie (Best Animated Film Oscar for 2013) by Tim Burton, USA, 2012, Fantastic Mr. Fox (Crystal for Best Feature Film at International Film Festival of Annecy in 2010 / France) by Wes Anderson, USA, 2009, Corpse Bride by Tim Burton, USA, 2005, The Sandman (Das Sandmännchen) by Sinem Sakaoglu, Germany, 2010; O'Apostolo by Fernando Cortizo, etc.

Unlike the productions of the major studios who combine the necessary resources with a precise development and a tight production schedule, the absence of financing for development did not allow us to adhere to a strict timetable. Nevertheless we managed without great financial means to develop the project freely without any artistic constraints and dictats of a financial partner.

Today, with a solid script structure and a finalized aesthetic developed through pre-production (such as storyboard, characters character, story board, actors' game, graphic bible, characters and sets, puppets, etc.) I am seeking financial partners to set up the business plan for production.

