



## A MOBILE CINEMA EXPERIENCE IN NIGER

Reach and impact

Dominique Thaly



Mobile cinema projects in Africa reach as far back as the colonial times. Today, new and lighter technologies have made mobile cinema easier to implement. The Cinéma Numérique Ambulant (CNA) project has been in activity in Benin, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso since 2001. This article discusses CNA's impact on a rural audience in Niger.

Entertainment education, the use of entertainment as a communicative practice crafted to strategically communicate about development issues” (Tufte, 2005), has become an important communication strategy used by many national and international organizations throughout the world. The media used are radio, televisions, videos and folk theatre (Melkote and Steeves, 2001), with television and radio series being the most employed.

In South Africa, where 92% of the people have access to radio and 76% to television (CASE,1), television series broadcasted in prime time might well be a medium to reach a majority of target groups. However, in Niger, where 47% of the rural household owns a radio set and a mere 0.5% (INS, 2007) owns a television, strategies based on TV-series have a hard time reaching those who most need it. Besides radio, one of the media used by organizations that want to reach rural areas without access to television is mobile cinema.

Mobile cinema projects in Africa reach as far back as the colonial times. Today, new and lighter technologies have made mobile cinema easier to implement. The **Cinéma Numérique Ambulant** (CNA) project has been in activity in Benin, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso since 2001. The cinema trucks drive throughout those different countries, show educational and African feature films to rural audiences and conduct debates with them on the issues tackled by the educational films. By the end of 2007, the CNA claimed to have reached several million spectators, with more than 2,500 screenings.

Most of the entertainment education (EE) strategies belong to what Tufte

ISSUE 11  
October 2008

(2005) calls the first generation of EE, that is, strategies that aim at changing individual knowledge, attitude and behavior in the social marketing tradition. In the second generation of EE, participatory elements are introduced to take into account the need for structural changes for individual changes to occur. Tufte gives as an example the Soul City project in South Africa, which tries to involve the audience in all the stages of the communication strategies. In the third generation of EE, there is a paradigm shift from a social marketing oriented, individual-focused persuasion strategy, to a questioning of power structures in the society in order not just to change individual behavior, but also to challenge social norms, power relations and structural conditions. The expected outcomes are an articulation of social and political processes, structural changes and collective action. One example of a EE project of the third generation is the project of the Nicaraguan NGO “Puntos de Encuentro” (Rodriguez, 2005), whose soap opera “Sexto Sentido” is embedded in the Nicaraguan social movements against violence against women as “The legacy of organized civil society feeds the storylines of Sexto Sentido” (Rodriguez, 2005, 377). This paper tries to find out where the CNA project fits into Tufte’s classification through an analysis of its different components and their impacts for other organizations in developing countries, to see how they can best integrate mobile cinema in their education-entertainment strategy.

The impact of TV series on the knowledge, attitude and behavior of the audience has been measured mainly through surveys, focus groups and individual interviews. Media ethnography (Tufte, 2000) has also been used to grasp the role of media on the viewer’s everyday life. In recent literature on communication for development, most evaluations have been made mainly around TV series, and very few exist looking into mobile cinema projects. Surely, some short-term evaluations exist in the gray literature of organizations that have used mobile cinema in their awareness raising work, but I could actually find only one thesis on short-term impact of the CNA-project in Mali -unpublished (Berteau, 2005).

The case study discussed in this article, undertaken in the first semester of 2007, aimed at measuring the medium term impact of the CNA project on a rural audience in Niger. The CNA project shows different kind of materials in public spaces –educational films as well as African feature films, and conducts related debates.

One reason for undertaking the study was that the CNA project and its sponsors needed to know what kind of expected and unexpected impact it was having on its audiences. In my role as a voluntary consultant to this project, it was also important for me to explore the project’s actual impact and the possibilities to improve the work of the CNA.

## THE CNA PROJECT

Since 2001, be it in Mali, Niger, Benin, and since 2007 in Burkina Faso, children in rural villages await the arrival of the CNA truck. They wait at the asphalt road since the early afternoon, while their parents and elders are busy in the village. As soon as the truck appears, they run behind it and escort it to the village. When it arrives at the place where the screening is to take place, some of the other children are already busy wetting the sand to prevent excessive dust. Others arrive from other places of the village, carrying benches, chairs and a table on their head. They already know where to install everything. The CNA team goes to the house of the village chief to greet him. They are already familiar with each other and the greetings are warm. The team has time to set up all the electronic equipment by day light. They also lay down mats in front of the screen for the younger children to sit down. They are surrounded by children, who sing songs from the last movie they saw with the CNA, or ask to see one movie again. The night falls, and the adults and older children gather in the mosque to say the Maghrib. Between the Maghrib and the 'Isha, the CNA shows video clips from Ivory Coast or Nigeria. The children sing with delight, some dance. Young and older adults from the village and neighboring villages start to gather all around the screen. After the last prayer, the CNA female animator greets the public and announces the program: most of the time, the evening starts with a slapstick comedy from Buster Keaton, then one or two educational short films. The debate follows, where everybody can make a comment, ask or answer a question. Last, the highlight of the evening, an African feature film, is shown. Since most of the times the film is in French, the female animator translates it into one of the national languages. When the film is over, it is well into the night, sometimes after midnight. Parents carry away the younger children who have fallen asleep and everybody goes home. The team dismantles the whole equipment under the spotlights, and fixes everything onto the car. Somebody brings them their dinner -a gift from the villagers. Most of the time, they get home at 2 or 3 a.m., and the day after they do the same all over again, but in another village.

French filmmaker Christian Lambert and French film stage designer Laurence Vendroux set up the CNA project. Its primary objective is to show quality African feature films in Africa. Those African films, especially those done in so-called Francophone African, seldom find their way to the natural audience, the African people. Among the reasons, there is the closing of movie theatres, the dominance of video CDs and of American action films and Kung Fu films. African Governments are lacking money to fund a viable movie industry, and development agencies just do not have funds for cultural projects. Yet the showing of African feature films (or of local theatre and dance productions) is maybe what has the greatest potential for social change, as some of them do question social structures

and put everything into perspective. While education films belong to the communication for behavior change category, the African films done according to the African film theory is based on the use of a medium for social change and is a reclaim of their identity by formerly oppressed people. As the funding for showing only African feature films was short, the CNA project had to add up a secondary objective, which is the showing of education films.

Since 2001, the CNA project has created four chapters: in Benin (with two screening units), in Niger (three units), in Mali (three units) and in Burkina Faso (one unit). All chapters have become non-profit local associations, and are managed autonomously. Each unit has a video projector, a DVD and VHS player, a silent generator, a 4x3 meter screen and a sound system. Each unit has also a set of African feature and educational movies. The team consists of a female animator (she translates the films and facilitates the dialogue on educational topics) who is also the leader of the team, a driver, and a technician projectionist. The whole team has been thoroughly trained in the handling and maintenance of the material and in the whole concept of the CNA project, as well as in the topics discussed when showing the educational materials.

On the premise that most villages approached by the project have never seen a movie, the CNA visits each village ten times, in order for the inhabitants to get used to it and to go beyond the novelty effect of a new technology. It chooses ten villages in a 50 km perimeter and visits each village ten times over a period of five months. The CNA project signs up a protocol with each village, pledging to visit 10 times -and the village pledges to welcome it, help with the installation and give a meal to the CNA team at the end of each screening. Both parties choose the films to be shown among those that the CNA has the rights for, and according to the topics that the village is interested in: for example, malaria, HIV/AIDS, fistulae, hygiene, schooling, etc.

The CNA Niger does not have any subvention whatsoever. It sells its services to national and international organizations, and with the money saved from those services it finances its functioning. By selling its services, the CNA project still tries to respect its most fundamental objective, namely, to show African movies to rural audiences. However, at times some of its principles might not be respected, depending on the demands set by the donor organization hiring it. Sometimes, the CNA does one-time shows in urban settings. For the time being, this is the only way in which the CNA has been able to survive, or even to expand. Since it is a non-profit association, earnings either pay for the costs of operation or are put aside as a reserve for work performed without a contract. This strategy has so far paid off for the CNA Niger, which was able to set up two more units. As of the end of 2006, it had undertaken 3 whole 100 (10 villages x

10 times) screening campaigns around Niamey as well as numerous shows for other organizations all over Niger. As a whole, by the end of December 2006, the CNA Niger had organized 723 screenings over 239 different sites, and had reached some 1,017,790 spectators according to internal CNA reports.

After each screening, the team fills in an evaluation sheet gathering some quantitative data (number of male, female and children participants), some qualitative data (transcript of the questions and comments done by the spectators during the debate part), and their impressions from the village.

The number of spectators ranges from 500 in small villages to more than 10,000 in some urban areas. The good sound system and the giant screen make it possible to accommodate that many people, although the debate phase is reduced to allowing the voices of one or two speakers when the crowd gets too big.

## THE EDUCATIONAL FILMS

The CNA project shows two types of movies, educational and African feature films. Embedded in the social marketing tradition, the educational films shown aim at changing knowledge, attitudes and behavior of the individuals in the audience on a number of health related and development topics. However, the context in which those films are screened, the public screenings, turn the experience into a community one that goes beyond individuals. The village inhabitants come together for the show. They have the opportunity to comment on the films in public and to discuss them with friends. Moreover, the context in which certain educational films were made implies participatory elements. For example, the *Scénario du Sahel* series was made after a contest among youth of several West African countries to develop creative ideas for short films on HIV/AIDS (Winskell, K. et al. 2005). Therefore, the scenarios are derived from the potential viewers' daily lives as seen through the eyes of their peers, adding a participatory element, albeit indirect, to the whole experience.

## AFRICAN FILMS

The African feature films, on the other hand, are embedded in the African cinema theory as developed among others by Teshome H. Gabriel, Ferid Boughedir, and Manthia Diawara. African films, emerged in the decolonization time and were assigned the important role to help African

people reclaim their identity and “the right to represent one’s self rather than simply be represented” (Thakway, 2003). Several trends can be distinguished. The social-political tendency wants to viewer “to become aware of the structures which condition and encourage him to demand change and improvement in his condition” (Boughedir, 2000, p. 112). The moralist tendency wants to change the individual, compelling him to make a moral change and to go back to the tradition. The cultural trend is also a discussion about tradition without idealizing it as it shows its positive and negative aspects. The commercial trend is close to the Hollywood type of films with financial gain as main goal, “to the detriment of cultural or social enrichment” (Boughedir, 2000, p. 114). They want to entertain their audience, and if sometimes they have a moralist or social message, they usually have a “happy ending”, and the purpose remains the amusement of the audience.

## THE CNA AUDIENCE

Unlike the European or North-American cinematic experience, which is very individual, the CNA experience of watching films is completely different. It is a collective event. Moreover, it operates in a 360° dimension: people can watch the movie from the back of the screen. Many do not sit down, and they talk during the films’ screenings, sometimes looking at the picture without necessarily listening to the sound. Through their commenting, the conversation among them, as well as the collective laughs, they participate in a shared experience provoked by the movie. This is a special kind of audience. In the case of the CNA project, the public is made of inhabitants of a specific community from one or several villages and constitutes a social group with at least one shared identifying characteristic, the common space (McQuail, 2005).

## MEDIA EFFECT

In order to measure the possible impacts, a model developed by McQuail (2005) was used for this case study. McQuail developed a typology of long term and short-term effects along the dimension of intentionality. Since the case study was undertaken in a village that had been approached by the CNA project three years prior to research, it looked into medium-term impact. According to the McQuail model, short term planned effects can be propaganda, individual responses, news learning and agenda setting, that is ‘the process by which the relative attention given to items or issues in news coverage influence the rank order of public awareness of issues and attribution of significance.’ (McQuail, 2005). Long-term planned effects can include development diffusion, news diffusion, diffusion of innovations, and distribution of knowledge. Short-term effects like

individual reaction, collective reaction, and policy effects as well as long-term effects like social control, socialization, reality defining and construction of meaning, institutional change, cultural, and social change, and social integration range among possible unplanned effects (McQuail, 2005).

## THE CASE STUDY

The case study focused on one village, partly due to limited resources in terms of time and funding. One survey, two focus groups and four individual interviews were chosen as methods for researching. The population size of the case study was the whole population of the village except for children under 15 years old, who were 12 at the time the CNA visited the village.

The village selected is called Hondey Koirá Tégui, located about 50 km from Niamey, along the Niger river. With 2,700 inhabitants, it had received the CNA 10 times between August 2003 and January 2004. Each show drew an average of about 800 people. The educational films shown were about HIV/AIDS (9 fiction short films), malaria (2 documentary short films), hygiene (one fiction short film) and family planning (one 1-hour fiction film). Among the ten African feature films shown, there were five “commercial” films whose main purpose is to entertain the spectators, albeit with contents referring to the consequences of polygamy, female emancipation or poverty. Three films belong to the cultural trend category, whether about the cultural trend or the return to the source. Only one film has been classified in the socio-political tendency. One last film falls out of the classification of African film theory, as it belongs to another genre, African mythology and folktale.

Fieldwork was carried out in the second half of March 2007. It turned out that the timing was not favorable, as many young males had temporarily left the village to find work in the capital city or in the neighboring countries. Consequently, there were no more than 850 adults in the village (compared to the expected 1,100 adults over 15 years old).

Findings confirmed the popularity of the CNA project: 80 percent of the interviewees had at least attended one show, and almost all of them liked them. Those who did not attend the movies were in general older women and non-educated people: some of the older women said that they did not go because they felt they were too old and that the younger people would laugh at them. It also seems that religion could have played a role in non-attendance -one Imam said he was reading the Koran and wives and daughters of Imams said their man/father kept them from going to the

movies.

Findings seemed to indicate that there was change in terms of individual knowledge (86.2% of the respondents who went to the screenings said that they learned something new); attitude (88.6% of the same respondents said that these films changed something in their life) and practice (91.8% said that they follow the advice given to them in the films). However, these seemingly positive figures are based on what people say they do, and not on a survey of actual implementation of these practices, which call for caution.

An informal discussion with the local nurse indicated that some health care services are used, like injections or pills for family planning, regular group sensitization for the use of insecticide treated nets and hygiene. Mothers do bring their children for regular immunization and malaria treatment. However, the nurse was unsatisfied with the number of people who came to visit him, feeling that they were too few. Still, during the focus group and individual discussions, it turned out that some of the people would go to Niamey or to the district health care centre, implying that data from the village health care centre level alone do not necessarily reflect the village's situation.

Even though these findings should be taken with caution, one could say that there seems to be a better distribution of knowledge about the topics portrayed by the educational films, and greater awareness, because of the showings. Exposure of the audience to those topics through the educational films has likely lead to greater knowledge, and even changes in some cases. In adopting changes, there is a different choice of approaches. For example, while the educational films gave more proactive advice as to how to protect oneself against HIV/AIDS (getting the test or using condoms), most respondents said that they are either faithful or they practice abstinence (21% and 27% respectively of the respondents who mentioned HIV/AIDS). 19% say that they use condoms, 6% say that they are careful with cutting objects and 27% either said that they protect themselves against HIV/AIDS or that they avoid women. None of the respondents said they did a test, and when I tried to speak about this issue or the issue of condoms in the focus groups and in the interviews, I could not get concrete answers as to whether and how people could get condoms in the village or whether somebody had gotten tested. This leads to the possibility that the educational films could have an effect in terms of awareness raising, but the individual ultimately chooses his or her implementation strategy according to his or her beliefs, the available options, and the socio-cultural context.

Educational films were more favored by the respondents than African feature films. They seemed to have been understood, and apparently felt

as more useful than African feature films -most of the time perceived as pure entertainment with no useful function.

Among the feature films, the most successful ones were those with high entertainment value. The cartoon *Kirikou* was the most appreciated film, especially among women. Some youths of the *fada* (peer group of youth) told me that some newborns have been named "Kirikou" after the movie. What most people liked in this film was its fantastic dimension. Nineteen respondents and some of the interviewees in the focus groups and individual interviews said that they liked *Kirikou* because the main character told his mother to give birth to him. This is reminiscent of African folktales; the story of the child who speaks in his mother's womb can be found in several of them.

This entertainment function of the feature films seems to be the favorite function of those films for the audience, tending to occlude the other effects they are meant to have, and limiting the analysis of the film by the audience. This also limits the effects as intended by the filmmakers. Looking at the different types of decoding of the filmic text, one can say that the audience had globally a preferred or negotiated reading of the texts, albeit the depth of interpretation is very low. For example, the audience's thinking about the issues dealt with in the films is limited to what is immediately graspable such as polygamy, rejection of war, and the rejection of so-called bad traditional behaviors. The other issues as intended by the filmmakers (women's issues, witchcraft, and modernity vs. tradition) have not been talked about.

The social function of the CNA gathering seemed to have had a positive, unplanned long-term effect in the form of empowerment and community building that led the village to take an active part in its own development. The respondents mentioned that thanks to their regularly coming together, there was greater solidarity and fraternity among them, which led to the creation of a village association. The president of that association confirmed that the CNA screenings were the starting point for the association. Male and female young people and adults up to 55 years old in the village belong to this association and they meet once a month to discuss their problems. By the time of the survey, they had managed to build the first and only health care centre in the village as well as two classrooms of the Medersa school.

This effect must also be taken with great caution, since other factors and pre-conditions certainly led to it. Still, the screenings were an occasion for a better interaction. The facilitation of dialogue among the inhabitants and the exchange of advice related to the topics of the films had a socialization effect.

## THE CNA-PROJECT: A GREAT POTENTIAL YET TO BE EXPLOITED

Despite the limitations of the project (i.e. its relatively high costs of operation and the fact that it can reach only a limited number of people at a time), the case study indicated that the CNA seems to have a very positive impact in terms of reaching actual results that match its intentions. Especially regarding the issues tackled in the educational films. The audience seemed to have understood very well and made use of the messages diffused in the educational films.

Regarding the African feature films, it seems that they did not quite reach their objectives. The audience perceived them as being pure entertainment and was not able to decode the filmic text and go beyond the primary meaning of the films. The reading of a complex film text has to be trained, and it is up to the CNA animators to better explain the hidden meaning beyond the entertaining pictures and actions. If the films were better explained and discussed about during the debate phase, I do think that the audience would start appreciate them as they would make them reflect on the way they live, the political situation and the power structures in their own society.

As for whether the CNA belongs to the first, second or third generation of EE, one could say it belongs to the first generation. It is quite diffusionist, albeit with inbuilt group communication elements, but it has the potential to actually become a third generation EE type of project if it makes a better use of its potentials in its social dimension and in the meaning-making of the African feature films.

Dominique Thaly, a graduate from Malmö University's Master in Communication for Development, also holds a Master's degree in political sciences from the Otto-Suhr-Institute in Berlin, Germany. She worked for 5 years in Niger in the area of communication with the German Development Service (DED) and is a freelance consultant with the Communication for Social Change Consortium (CFSC). Originally from Martinique, she currently works for the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) in Germany.  
[dominique@agence-thaly.com](mailto:dominique@agence-thaly.com)

Barlet, O. (2000). *African Cinema: Decolonizing the Gaze*. London: Zed Books Ltd. [First published in French under the title *Les Cinémas d'Afrique noire* in 1996 by L'Harmattan, Paris].

Bertheau, J. (2005). Cinéma et développement. Le cas de la diffusion du cinéma au Mali à travers l'exemple du Cinéma Numérique Ambulant. [electronic version]. Mémoire pour l'obtention du DESS de développement, coopération, action humanitaire, Sorbonne, Paris. Not published.

Boughedir, F. (2000). African Cinema and Ideology: Tendencies and Evolution. In J. Givanni (ed.), *Symbolic Narratives / African Cinema. Audience, Theory and the Moving Image* (pp. 109-121). London: British Film Institute.

CASE (no date). "Let the Sky to be the limit." Soul City Evaluation report. Online. Institut National de la Statistique (INS) et Macro International Inc.

(2007). Enquête Démographique et de Santé et à Indicateurs Multiples du Niger 2006. Calverton, Maryland: INS et Macro International Inc.

Diawara, M. (1992). *African cinema: Politics and Culture*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Gabriel, T. H. (1989). Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films. In P. Williams and L. Chrisman (ed.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*. (pp. 340-358). New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's Mass communication theory*. 5th Edition. London: Sage Publications.

Melkote, S. R. and H. L. Steeves (2001). *Communication for development in the Third World. Theory and Practice for Empowerment*. 2nd edition. London: Sage Publications.

Rodríguez, C. (2005). From the Sandinista revolution to telenovelas: the case of Puntos de Encuentro. In Hemer O. & T. Tufte (eds.), *Media and Glocal change. Rethinking Communication for Development*. (pp. 367-384). Buenos Aires: CLASCO.

Thackway, M. (2003). *Africa shoots back. Alternative Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Film*. Oxford: James Currey Ltd.

Tufte, T. (2005). Entertainment-education in development communication. Between marketing behaviours and empowering people. In Hemer O. & T. Tufte (eds.), *Media and Glocal change. Rethinking Communication for Development*. (pp. 159-174). Buenos Aires: CLASCO.

Winskell, K. & D. Enger (2005). Young voices travel far: a case study of Scenarios from Africa. In Hemer O. & T. Tufte (eds.), *Media and Glocal change. Rethinking Communication for Development*. (pp. 403-416). Buenos Aires: CLASCO.

SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2008-10-04

