

By Ibrahim Shaddad

## Sudan Film Unit

Sudan Film Unit was established between the end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties within the Public Relation Office, which belonged to the Civil Secretary Office under the Anglo-Egyptian Rule. The Unit started with a British production officer, Mr. Mathew, who came from South Africa and brought with him some film equipments.

Two Sudanese were appointed - Kamal Mohamed Ibrahim, scriptwriter and Gaddalla Gubara, cameraman – who were trained on the job and later outside the country. At the advent of the national rule, Mohamed Eid Zaki, cameraman - Mohamed Ibeed, sound engineer - Abdel Aziz Nahas, editor joined the unit.

The Unit possessed one 16mm camera and a Ciniola (a small manual viewer-editor). Under the supervision of the Film Production Officer the Sudanese staff made Films like “*Song of Khartoum*” - a

*portrayal of a song by a famous singer shot at Khartoum and the confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile*

-, and “

*Sudan White Gold*

” -

*a very informative documentary that covered the important cotton cultivation project in the Gezira.*

Also, among the few short fiction films of that era, two very mature and powerful films stand out;

“*Wasted Childhood*

”

*portrays a street child as a product of a dysfunctional family*

, and “

*The Afflicted*

”

*about social conditions leading to Tuberculosis*

. Kamal Mohamed Ibrahim directed both films.

The Unit produced documentaries on different subjects. This production was presented in public cinemas as well as in many rural areas by means of the Mobile Cinema Unit, which was established in 1946 and by the sixties had a huge number of equipped vehicles that roamed many parts of the country.

After the Independence in 1956 the Unit became part of the Ministry of Information and Labour and a Sudanese “*Al Kheir Hashim*” was appointed as its director. The Unit expanded its responsibilities by undertaking the production of a cinemagazine.

In 1958 the Unit produced for the first time a film in cinemascope. “*A Day to Remember*” was an experimental film shot in 35mm colour cinemascope.

Also in 1958 the Unit acquired a film processing laboratory in Black and White 16mm and 35mm that allowed it to process films locally instead of sending material to England for processing. As a result the production of films in 16mm and 35mm – documentaries, travelogues and cinemagazines - jumped tremendously in 1959.

In the sixties the Unit, under the Ministry of Information, greatly enhanced its capabilities by acquiring more film equipments and training more technicians and filmmakers in all aspects of the film industry in Khartoum and the United States.

The Unit made a great number of documentaries on diverse social, economical, educational and informational subjects.

Here is a statistic of the number of films produced between 1954 and April 1962 (*Kheir Hashim/Directory of Sudan 61-62*)

:

1954 – 8 documentary films in 16mm.

1955 – 2 documentary films in 16mm.

1956 – 4 documentary films in 16mm.

1957 – 2 documentary films in 16mm.

----- 2 documentary films in 35mm.

----- 3 cinemagazines in 35mm.

1958 – 3 documentary films in 16mm.

----- 1 cinemagazine no:4 in 35mm.

----- 1 documentary film 35mm.

----- 1 documentary film in color cinemascope 35mm.

1959/60 – 38 documentary films.

-----22 cinemagazines.

1961/62 – 20 documentary films.

----- 33 cinemagazines.

The Sudan Film Unit used to issue a bulletin in English containing detailed information about its annual production and distribute it to ministries, embassies and cinema houses. Below is a one-page example:

Films Produced by the Sudan Film Unit

January 1959 - 1961

No:

Title

Gauge

35 mm 16 mm

Colour

or

B/W

Print Cost

35 mm 16 mm

Screen Time in

mins

Language

E/C or A/C

Brief Synopsis

29

The Land is green

35 16

Colour

£ 55 £ 22

24

E/C & A/C

A documentary film in Eastman colour showing a cross-section of agricultural life in the different provinces

30

The New Sudan

35 16

Colour

£ 66 £ 26

28

E/C & A/C

A companion colour documentary film to "The Land is Green" deals with modern developments and new

31

Juba Sports Day

35 | 16

B / W

£ 16 | £ 6

13

A / C

A film showing the activities of Southern Boys' Schools.

32

Police College

35 | 16

B / W

£ 23 | £ 10



23

A / C

A documentary film showing the training of police cadets at the new College at Burri near Khartoum.

33

Bakht

El Ruda

Town of

Light

35 | 16

B / W

£ 14 | £ 6

3

E / C &

A / C

A film showing the activities of the biggest Educational Center in the Sudan.

At the end of the sixties the Unit acquired a new film processing laboratory. It also moved into its new premises, a first-rate film studio financed by the American Aid.

In the seventies the Unit was renamed “Administration for Cinema Production” under the Ministry of Information and Culture. The ‘Administration’ continued producing films, but gradually the production was directed towards heralding the agricultural and industrial development projects. Among the noticeable productions of the seventies was the long feature film “*Sheroug*”, a story that took place during the reigning military regime directed by Anwar Hashim. The ministry banned the film and it has never been screened publicly.

By the end of the seventies the social and cultural substance of the ‘Administration’ started to wane due to the partial role assigned to it and favoured by the politicians. The ‘Administration’ gradually became a mouthpiece of the government. It propagated its policies and activities, which were mainly destined for broadcast on the National Television. When the National Television established its own 16mm reversal Film Production Unit in about 1976 the constant need for the ‘Administration for Cinema Production’ decreased immensely. Also the invasion of the video technology, cheaper and quicker in transmitting the same message, rendered the ‘Administration’ meaningless. The Video appropriated all the limited services the ‘Administration’ used to deliver. As the ‘Administration’ became of no great use to the government, production budgets became scarce. This sorrowful situation went on till the seizure of power by the present Islamic military regime in 1989. The regime let the ‘Administration’ slide into oblivion and after

many years of negligence, handed over the 'Administration for Cinema Production' to the Corporation for Radio and Television. The Corporation promptly dissolved the 'Administration', engaged some of the staff, pensioned some and sacked the rest of them. The film equipments were dismissed as junk and the film studio building was reconstructed to accommodate some of the Corporation's personnel. The film library has been relegated to the basement.

Thus, the only film production studio in the country has been removed from existence.

### **State Corporation for Cinema:**

The State Corporation for Cinema (started under the name "Cinemayo" in 1970) was set up to supervise the public cinema houses, to better the standard of the imported films and to produce and encourage the production of feature films. The Corporation was put in charge of importation and distribution of films in the country. Some cinema houses were confiscated and put under the administration of the Corporation. But two years later the cinemas were returned to their owners. Unfortunately, the Corporation engaged itself in the more profitable business of importation and distribution of films and disregarded its role as producer of films. In its early days The Corporation co-produced with Egypt and Poland the feature film "*Between the Desert and the Jungle*", a story that took place during the Mahdia

. The film was not shown in Sudan and the Corporation did not venture again into production until the eighties. It produced "

*Four days in Suad's Island*

" directed by Ali Abdel Gayoum

*documenting a Zar ceremony*

, some commercials and some shorts following a French training Workshop. Its belated endeavours to produce a feature film "

*Nile Saga*

" by Ibrahim Shaddad was halted during production shortly after the Islamic Military attained power. The fate of the other feature titled "

*Al Bouggaa*

", composed of three short fiction films "

*The Ant Hill*

" by Suliman M. Ibrahim, "

*The Carpenter's Door*

" by Abdul Rahman Najdi, and "

*Black Water*

" by Ibrahim Shaddad" has been unknown. The Military regime, under the pretext of privatization, dissolved the State Corporation for Cinema at the time when the film had been in a London's film laboratory. The Disbanding Committee who took control of the Corporation's assets refused to pay the processing fees due to the British lab.

### **Cinema Section, Department of Culture:**

The Department of Culture was established in 1972 under the Ministry of Culture and Information. The Cinema Section, headed by Abdel Moniem Adawi, started as a Film Unit within the Folklore Section. Soon this Unit managed to work independently and attained the status of a section. As production budgets were rare, the section strived hard to promote film culture and appreciation through organizing forums and film shows and publishing a film quarterly. The Section became a refuge for most of the few Sudanese filmmakers who studied in Europe and Egypt. With minimal budgets they made some outstanding short films among them those that have won international acclaim: "The Dislocation of Amber" by Hussein Shariffe (*A fantastic appreciation of the history of the old port of Suakin*) , "The Rope" by Ibrahim Shaddad (*Two men and their donkey search for safety during the Turkish punishment expedition of 1821.*) , "The Station" by El Tayib Mahdi (*The life in a highway station where heavy trucks congest and simple villagers wait in vain for a lift*) and others...

In the early nineties the Islamic regime's policy toward culture, art and the freedom of expression put an end to the activities of the Film Section. What was left of the Section then, plus few employees from the State Corporation for Cinema, was restructured under the name "Film Centre" to mainly redistribute the films previously owned by the State Corporation for Cinema to the few operating cinema houses.

A host of negative factors soon brought about the closure of the cinemas, and the termination of the task of the Film Centre.

### The Private Sector:

Since the sixties private productions have been carried out by some individuals. They have made mostly informational and advertisement films on the demand of public or private establishments. All the very few Sudanese long feature films screened publicly were produced by private individuals. Except the first film, all of them relied on the help of the 'Administration for Cinema Production'. The first Sudanese feature film was "*Hopes and Dreams*" (A farmer struggles to provide for his family and hopes his educated son would help fulfil their dreams) produced by El Rasheed Mahdi and directed by Ibrahim Mallassy in 1970; then "

*Tajooj*

"

(A love story that happened a hundred years ago in the Eastern part of the Sudan)

produced and directed by Gadalla Gubara in 1982; then "

*Rihlt Oyoon*

"

(A romantic story about a Sudanese Student and an Egyptian girl shot in Sudan and Egypt)

produced by Ibn Al Badia and directed by Anwar Hashim in 1984; then "

*And the Hope Still Goes On*

"

(A sailor's problems trying to readapt to his hometown after a very long absence)

Produced by Elleewa Co. in 1993; then the last one "

*Barakt El Sheikh*

"

(Two men pose as Fakirs and use the Morse Code to exploit the ignorant villagers)

produced in 1998 by Zeriab company and directed by Gadalla Gubara. In recent years two more feature films were produced, but have not been publicly released. At the present, film production has practically ceased. Though, video production companies have been mushrooming, none has ventured on the production of feature films.

### The Present Situation:

At the moment, the previous governmental bodies that produced films do not exist. The private sector has not developed an economical approach that would make Film production a lucrative business. The private sector's participation in filmmaking has been whimsical and sporadic and

therefore it cannot be relied upon to establish and promote the field of filmmaking. Filmmakers think, even in this time of privatization and the free market, the government has some responsibilities towards culture. The government must play a positive role by alleviating the economical factors stalling production and discouraging the business of cinema houses. The Government must also slacken the laws inhibiting freedom of expression.

### **Note**

- *The article does not mention the short films produced but barred from public screening.*