



AFRICA

Cologne's African film festival switches to diverse themes

COVID-19 restrictions overshadowed the 2020 edition of the Africa Film Festival in Cologne. The filmmakers discussed the downside of the pandemic at screenings of films that delve into topics like stigma and Afro hair.



Most of the filmmakers from Africa and its diaspora who had submitted their work could not make it to Cologne due to COVID-19 restrictions. Franco-Tunisian filmmaker Hind Meddeb was one of those who made it. [African filmmakers](#) need more support, not just in times of pandemic, she said.

"The situation is tough for the African filmmakers who don't have the chance to receive help from their governments," Meddeb told DW. The filmmakers are not only hit financially, but they also have to face restrictions imposed by their governments due to the pandemic."

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She said it has not been easy to work because of the limitation of freedom. "The coronavirus pandemic is a disaster from the restriction on freedom point of view," Meddeb added.



associated with poverty, disease, and corruption. "It is this type of festival that allows us to go in the direction to create African solidarity," said Meddeb.

Africa Film Festival Lite version

This year, the festival had to slash down on everything as a result of COVID-19. Instead of screening 80 films, the number was reduced to 29. Six international guests were in attendance. Usually, 30 or more make it. Out of the 260 bookable seats, the organizers allowed only 60 to be sold — with two to three screenings per day instead of the usual four to six, back-to-back.



The tickets could only be bought online, whereas one could get them at the box office in the past. There was no festival information hub in the foyer, no music, bookstalls, no African food, and no festival party.

Nevertheless, FilmInitiativ e.V, the Afrika Film Festival organizer, told DW, they hope "people are still interested in movies from Africa and the African diaspora."

The festival was not confined to one theme this year: the films and discussions were about Afro hair, women's rights, homophobia, and the rights of LGBT+ people in Africa.

Using the silver screen to fight stigma

Africans, specifically those born in Europe, have often felt stigmatized because of their hair's texture, commonly known as afro. That is one of the various themes addressed at this year's Cologne Film festival.

50 YEARS OF AFRICAN FILM AT FESPACO

A festival of African movies

One of the oldest and most important film festivals on the African continent is celebrating a major anniversary: the Pan-African Film and Television Festival in Ouagadougou — FESPACO — took place for the first time in February 1969.



Afro hair and embracing African identity was a strong theme in this year's Africa Film Festival

"I know people who have an afro but never had the courage to go outside with their afro haircut on natural. I, too, have never done it," says Marie in a documentary film "Strong Hair," directed by Kokutekeleza Musebeni. The 33-year-old German filmmaker has roots in the continent. Her father, a Tanzanian, came to Germany in the 1970s.

[Musebeni's film is one of 75 feature films](#), documentaries, animations, and short films screened at the 18th African Film Festival in Cologne. The film tells the story of Marie, a girl born to African parents, who has struggled to accept prejudices about her skin color, more specifically, her hair since she was a child.

Finally, she makes peace with herself and appreciates her hair even better. She had to use hair relaxers to straighten her hair. But now she says she does it differently for her daughter, knowing that some of these hair relaxers are toxic.

[Read more: Africa Film Festival 2019: Migration and citizenship take center stage](#)

Embracing identity



acceptance and stigma. "Medusa" by Johanna Makabi and Adele Albresey, evokes the same theme and immerses the viewer in the African community's world. It portrays the prejudices about the afro cut, the desire to relax hair to 'appear' more beautiful, and the stigmatization of black men who prefer women with straight hair.

"Hair Love" by Matthew A. Cherry, Everett Downing, and Jr. Bruce W. Smith, is another film by Afro-American filmmakers, which shows the difficulties an African father goes through to style his little girl's afro hair. She wants to have an afro haircut to please her sick mother, who used to give her the same haircut before her illness.

Raising awareness

"It is a real issue to have afro hair in Germany. People often ask

Nollywood struggling with effects of coronavirus pandemic

me: so can you comb your hair, or they touch my hair without asking me, even strange people do this and a lot of other stuff that makes me feel stigmatized with my hair, with my appearance," said Esther Donkor, a writer and member of the Festival organization.

To raise awareness, she has created a platform called "KrauseLocke," a German word which means "nappy" hair. Esther has also written a book entitled 'Keep it kraus! Das basisbuch für krauselocken' with her sister Diana Donkor, which she also presented during the film screenings.

Afro hair is not the only exciting theme at this year's festival. Women's rights, homophobia, and LGBT rights in African society are [other crucial topics](#) that were addressed during the festival.

Read more: [Making movies in Africa: Breaking conventions](#)

The migrants from Africa and other parts of the world have always been a huge topic in the festival's previous editions. This year was no exception. "Paris Stalingrad" by Hind Meddeb, the Franco-Tunisian filmmaker, exposes the plight of undocumented migrants in Paris.



frontiers in the city center. Meddeb followed Mohamed, a Sudanese refugee who went through many difficulties trying to settle in France. It eventually worked out for him, but Meddeb wanted to show that he was one of the lucky ones. Most of the refugees survive on the streets with little help from the government.

Street Debate: Germany's Africa Film Festival