

Festival of Cinema and Friendship of Peoples: Reflection on International Film Festival of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (68-88)

Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan and previously Uzbek SSR, is quite often associated with the concept of "friendship of peoples". During World War II this southern Soviet republic became a shelter for thousands of evacuees of any nationality within the Soviet Union, many of which eventually settled down there for good. As a result, Tashkent rapidly became a melting pot of different ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs and obtained a number of labels glorifying its reputation of multi-diversity.

In June 1958 it was ordered by the Ministry of Culture of the USSR to conduct a film festival of Asia and Africa in Tashkent from 20 August to 3 September. The plan seemed to be quite hasty, the whole festival programme was supposed to be developed within just ten days. However, the film festival of Asia and Africa still did take place at the end of summer 1958 in the capital of the Uzbek SSR. This became some sort of a pilot version of the festival and after that, it didn't reappear for 10 more years.

When in 1967 it was suggested by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan to organize an international film festival in Tashkent, the momentum felt like it's been built up to for years and at the same time turned quite sudden shifting the cultural epicenter away from central Moscow and towards to Central Asia, the vast region that up until then stayed rather deserted in terms of arts and culture events and festivities. The reasoning behind the initiation of this festival may have had several purposes and certain notions it was determined to promote among wider audiences on the broader territories. The name was given as Tashkent International Film Festival of Asia and Africa and the slogan was stated as follows: "For peace, social progress and freedom of peoples!".

The first International Film Festival of Asia and Africa was held in 1968. The grandiose opening ceremony took place at the Arts Palace in Tashkent with the opening title *Vsadniki Revolyutsii* (Horsemen of Revolution) by Uzbek director Kamil Yarmatov. More than 240 various film practitioners from 46 Asian and African countries were invited to the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Republic.

The next (second) Tashkent International Film Festival was in 1972 and then biennially. In 1976 the festival expanded, Latin America was added and since then it became Tashkent International Film Festival of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The quintessential period for the festival lasted 20 years starting from 1968 to 1988, there were ten editions throughout that timeframe.

The festival organization's scope was like that of the Olympics and pulled all the resources from all levels of the state sector. It was crucially important for the organizers to showcase the festival in Tashkent as the "dream come true". Signature hospitality, high-level receptions, and all means of care and attention were guaranteed to each and every of multiple guests visiting the festival and the Uzbek Republic.

Each year the programme of International Film Festival of Asia, Africa, and Latin America was large, impressive, and extremely versatile in terms of geographies, genres, and formats. It included large-scale militant features, genre films, different kinds of documentaries, and even newsreels. The emerging cinematographies of such countries as Yemen, Nigeria, Sudan, and others participated in several years of the festival with submissions of the early feature films produced in these states. For example, in 1968 among the laureates was *Miyo Iyo Magaalo* (Town and Village) by Hadj Mohamed Giumale — one of the first Somali feature films that would later become very popular in the country. Besides, such iconic figures of the African continent cinema as Ousmane Sembene, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, Bob Sow, and Sarah Maldoror would frequently attend the festival and present their films. There was never competition implemented in the festival programme as ideologically

Tashkent International Film Festival intended to highlight and celebrate the freedom of peoples and equality of nations.

Being conceived as a rather pragmatic tool for the development of cultural diplomacy, once born out in these particular dimensions of reality and time (Tashkent in the late 60s), International Film Festival of Asia, Africa, and Latin America started becoming something much more meaningful than it was ever meant to be at first. The platform for intercultural intellectual exchange among film professionals from Asia, Africa, and Latin America enabled open dialogue between South to South which was too distant to be overheard from the Center. Encounters, connections, and round tables involved the brightest representatives from the Global South and allowed them to finally be free and independent of external permit and approval.

Some of those lucky ones who witnessed Tashkent International Film Festival at its dawn and could experience being absorbed in this vivid celebration of cinema often describe it as a utopian dream that somehow and probably unintentionally became real for a glimmer of time in the history of Tashkent and granted the festival and its attendees euphoric sense of liberation. They say despite the massive scale of the event there was much less monitoring and control from the Party and KGB at the International Film Festival of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in Tashkent compared to any public gathering in Moscow. In contrast to the very officious atmosphere at the Moscow Film Festival, Tashkent's had more of a friendly and joyful flare. People would visit the local filmmakers and hang out more informally at their homes. This was not possible in Moscow but Tashkent was (and still is) a flagman of so-called oriental hospitality, thus it was normalized.

During the days of Tashkent International Film Festival hotel Uzbekistan was flooded with guests from different corners of the world and turned into a point of attraction for filmmakers, producers, actors, technicians, critics, and journalists of emerging cinematographies from the Global South. Volunteers, who were mostly young students, studio workers, and aspiring directors and actors, were actively involved in the coordination of international delegations. They remember their time at the

festival as a unique chance to meet and communicate with so many colleagues and peers and how this growing lively network made them feel like it widened their horizons of perception and made them feel more integrated and less isolated from the bigger cultural and cinematic scene of that period.

Reflecting on such a phenomenon as Tashkent International Film Festival of Asia, Africa, and Latin America now, it appears quite surreal, almost as surreal as if it was a collective dream that materialized in the late 60s Tashkent with rational help and ambitious socialist intentions of the Party. Behind the scene stayed dim and shady, however, these ten festivals over 20 years marked the highlight of local and regional cinema and tried to push its development further. A project that was invented as a demonstration of the Soviet progress and progressive decolonial attitude towards Central Asian republics, in essence, created a platform that allowed film professionals (and adorers) to meet, interact and unite more independently and gave the true meaning to the notorious friendship of the peoples concept. A concept extracted out of the Soviet communist ideology slipped into authentic alliances and sincere friendships and this became the most precious experience Tashkent International Film Festival gifted to hundreds of filmmakers across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.