

# Talking about Trees

A film by  
Suhaib Gasmelbari



93 mins / Sudan/France/Germany/Chad/Qatar / Arabic with English subtitles / 2019 /  
Cert PG

Berlin International Film Festival World Premiere (Panorama) 2019  
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## SYNOPSIS:

*“What kind of times are these, when  
To talk about trees is almost a crime  
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?”*

— Bertolt Brecht

Ibrahim, Manar, Suleiman and Altayeb are the members of the Sudanese Film Club founded in 1989. Unable to make films for years, they have decided to revive an old cinema. They are united not only by their love of cinema and their passionate desire to restore old films and draw attention to Sudanese film history once more, but also by the fact that they all enjoyed a film education outside Sudan.

Their plans to renovate the outdoor cinema come up against bureaucracy, lack of cash and a general fear of upsetting “he who cannot be named.” (The film was made before the recent overthrow of Omar al-Bashir).

In the meantime, they sit together and talk about the past and the history of Sudanese cinema, including their experiences of persecution and even torture as oppositional artists. They recall their times of exile and dream of a Sudan in which art and intellectual thought can be free. ‘We are smarter than them, but not as strong,’ is the conclusion.

Even if their plans may be unfulfilled, the strong solidarity and humour of the four no longer young men, and their new recruit, Hana, do give hope for the future.

Further information and downloads [here](#)

Photo set can be [here](#)



## With

IBRAHIM SHADDAD  
SULEIMAN MOHAMED IBRAHIM  
ALTAYEB MAHDI  
MANAR AL-HILO  
HANA ABDELRAHMAN SULIMAN  
(SUDANESE FILM GROUP, SFG)

## CREW

Director	SUHAIB GASMELBARI
Writer	SUHAIB GASMELBARI
Producer	MARIE BALDUCCHI
Photography	SUHAIB GASMELBARI
Editors	NELLY QUETTIER, GLADYS JOUJOU
Sound	ELSADIG KAMAL, KATHARINA VON SCHROEDER
Sound Editing	JEAN MALLET
Sound Mix	JEAN-GUY VERAN
Colourists	HERBERT POSCH, MARINE LEPOUTRE
Assistant Director	HANA ABDELRAHMAN SULIMAN
Co-producers	MELANIE ANDERNACH, MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN GOÏ-GOÏ PRODUCTIONS (CHAD) MADE IN GERMANY FILMPRODUKTION (GERMANY) VIDÉO DE POCHE (FRANCE) DOHA FILM FUND (QATAR) AGAT FILMS & CIE (FRANCE) SUDANESE FILM GROUP (SUDAN)
Production	AIDE AUX CINÉMAS DU MONDE CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE IDFA BERTHA FUND EUROPE IDFA BERTHA FUND LA RÉGION ILE-DE-FRANCE WORLD CINEMA FUND FILM UND MEDIENSTIFTUNG NRW DOHA FILM INSTITUTE SANAD DEVELOPMENT GRANT VENICE PRODUCTION BRIDGE
In association with	
With the support of	

Sudan / France / Germany / Chad / Qatar / 2019 / 93 min

## SUHAIB GASMELBARI

Suhaib Gasmelbari was born in 1979, in Sudan, and lived there until the age of 16. He studied film in France at the Université of Paris 8 and worked as a freelance cameraman and editor for Al Qarra, Al Jazeera and France 24. He has written and directed several short films, both fiction and documentary. *Talking about Trees* is his first feature-length documentary. He is also a researcher with a special focus on audio-visual archives. Through his research, he was able to find some long-lost Sudanese films and he actively participates in international and local projects for saving and digitizing Sudanese films, including those of Ibrahim Shaddad, Suleiman Mohamed Ibrahim and Altayeb Mahdi.

## FILMOGRAPHY

2012 ODA NAGAM (Ode To My Feet) (short film)

2017 SUDAN'S FORGOTTEN FILMS (TV Series documentary)

2019 TALKING ABOUT TREES



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I can say without hesitation that this film was born from an epic, yet real, image that happened in front of my eyes. I remember it clearly. It was the first time that I participated in a screening at a village with the four friends. After they set up the canvas screen and the show started, a sandy wind began to blow, moving the screen left and right. Two of them (Manar Al Hilo and Ibrahim Shaddad) quickly got up and sat on each side of the screen to anchor it down by tying both corners to their chairs. No one left despite the wind and the audience continued watching the film engagedly. As the wind strengthened, the screen blew up and deflated like the sails of a boat and sometimes the picture went off the screen and then came back. I was watching the faces of both men as they held the screen while laughing nervously like sailors in a storm. I felt that this trip to a nearby village of Khartoum granted me one of my most important existential lessons about resistance and determination. It was then that the necessity to make this film was born. This image that granted me the motivation to create this film is not included, just like the many other images that these four filmmakers had wanted to accomplish in the past forty years. However, the aggressive political winds of the country stood against their dreams, leaving behind a great bitterness but also a strong desire to fulfil them. *Talking about Trees* is the tale of their 45 years of attempting to make and show films and of the tireless hope that unites them forever – the story of a struggle of four crafty men with a witty sense of humour.

## FILMED INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR (English and German)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpZB7ZBv8JY>



## THE SUDANESE FILM CLUB

### IBRAHIM SHADDAD

Ibrahim studied filmmaking at the Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf (at that time Academy for Film and Television of the GDR) and graduated in 1964. Over the course of his career, he has made many medium-length and short films, including *Hunting Party* (1964) and *The Rope* (1984). Several of his projects have been banned by various governments in Sudan. He spent years in exile in Egypt and Canada before returning to Sudan. His love of cinema is deep and his vision of art is radical.



### SULEIMAN MOHAMED IBRAHIM

Suleiman studied documentary filmmaking at the VGIK Institute of Cinematography in Moscow from 1973 to 1978. He was awarded the Silver Prize for his short film *It Still Rotates* at the Moscow International Film Festival 1979. He is the driving force of the group. He is very disciplined and inventive and finds the answers to all the practical questions. Suleiman refused to go into exile following the military coup in 1989.



## ALTAYEB MAHDI

Altayeb graduated from the Cairo Higher Institute for Cinema in 1977. He has directed several artistically daring short films such as *The Station* (1988), *Four Times for Children* (1979) and *The Tomb* (1976). Altayeb is a man of few words but his brevity will always deliver the missing thought.



## MANAR AL HILO

Manar graduated from the Cairo Higher Institute for Cinema in 1977. He was always dedicated to support the works of his other friends. He worked on the production of all their films produced in Sudan. His smart wit persuasively found miraculous solutions to overcome production obstacles in a country without production means. He is a radical dreamer who loves cinema and does not cease to question the moral legitimacy of wanting to talk about cinema in a time of assassination and atrocities.



## INTERVIEW WITH SUHAIB GASMELBARI

By Serge Kaganski

### What sort of cinema viewer were you during your youth in Sudan?

My journey as a cinephile is not very classic. I grew up in Sudan in the nineties, a period when cinema did not exist at all in the country, all the cinemas were closed following the coup d'état. The nineties were a cultural desert in Sudan, and my access to culture and to the world was via books. The Security Services came to people's homes to arrest people and confiscate their books and at our home they confiscated *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky! These shortages and these bans, despite everything, had an interesting side - it created a kind of rarity, a desire. I wanted to go all over town searching high and low to find the books which I was looking for. We loved a book before even having read it. Television was dominated by propaganda for the "Holy War" which the government preached but nevertheless every week it showed an American film. We waited impatiently despite the electricity cuts which endlessly interrupted the transmissions. Sometimes you had to wait a whole week to see the end of the film!

Yet before the coup d'état, cinema was very popular, my parents took me to the Soviet Cultural Centre and without doubt I saw films by Tarkovsky or Eisenstein but I was too young to comprehend them or to even remember. Since that time an image has remained engraved on my mind: a child enters a room, he sees a man and a woman taking a bath, the woman's hair covers her face, then the ceiling starts to fall down. 16 years afterwards I rediscovered this scene, it was *Mirror* by Tarkovsky...

### When and how did you discover cinema?

Later when I was studying in Egypt for three years, then in France, in Tours where I went to learn French and study literature. In Tours I discovered the New Wave; Godard was very important for me, notably as a bridge between literature and cinema. It was amazing to discover the auteur cinema of the entire world, but it wasn't easy to make up for my late start. Later at the University Paris 8, a teacher talked about *Citizen Kane* as if every student already seen it. I realized that I hadn't seen it and I was the only person in the class that hadn't. Japanese cinema also made a great impression on me - I saw Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and *Dodes'kaden* over and over, and also *Tokyo Story* and *An Autumn Afternoon* by Ozu. I am especially attracted by the cinema of the East, whether Soviet or Asian. I also really like the cinema of Tsai Ming Liang for example.

### How did you go from being a spectator/student/cinephile to a cineaste?

I thought at first that the cinema was a profession reserved for a certain elite, rich and connected. In Tours my attitude changed thanks to a Super 8 workshop which allowed me to make a collective film, which was a great experience. I knew from the start that I wanted to learn cinematographic language in order to narrate things - not



only for the pleasure of watching but the question was how and where to start ? Film schools were very expensive and the entry exams very selective. Things are even more complicated for a foreigner who has not mastered the language and its cultural codes 100%. Finally, I was admitted to Paris 8, which for me was incredible even if it was not exactly a film school. It was a wonderful place which simply lacked some budget. There I made several shorts which I will never show, but they had a value as an exercise in apprenticeship. And then I discovered the Sudanese cineastes like the four whom I filmed in Talking About Trees (Suleiman, Ibrahim, Manar and Altayeb) who had formed the Sudanese Film Group (SFG), an association equivalent to a cine-club. I was impressed by the films of Ibrahim Shaddad, short films which took both on a political content and an artistic search. Shaddad was great! To know that auteur films like that could be made in Sudan in extremely difficult conditions was a revelation.

### **How did the project of Talking About Trees start?**

There were several phases. At the start there was my interest in their films and their work as critics - because they had created a cinema magazine in the 70s and 80s. Coming back to Sudan, I wanted to make a fiction film, but it was impossible without compromising with the regime and so I abandoned the project. Then I met Suleiman who presented me to his friends in the SFG. I accompanied them for their film screenings which they organised in villages. Once there the van broke down, which happened very often, and when we arrived at the village a sandstorm was forecast, but they installed the screen as if nothing was happening. The projection carried on all the time as the storm intensified, the screen blew about and moved all over, the image went in and out of focus and the four tried to stabilize the projector. During all this time the spectators were riveted to the screen, indifferent to the storm, which showed they had an absolute desire for cinema. It was epic. From that moment the necessity to make this film was born. It was not only to show the forgotten story of Sudanese cineastes but also to show how History can be written or not.

### **What strikes one about these four forgotten cineastes is their dignity, their humour, their lack of bitterness.**

I admire their dignity. They have made few films, but they consider the history of cinema as their own. They have written about cinema while knowing perfectly well that they have few or no readers, they are conscious of the paradox of writing about cinema in a country where cinema doesn't exist any longer, but they did it, integrating that paradox in their texts which are real literary works. Hence the necessity for this film, to render justice to these men and their work. They were the pioneers, the first people to leave the country in order to study cinema and come back to attempt to create a cinema that was artistically ambitious in Sudan, in an era when the only cinema possible was to make propaganda films for the regime. They faced all sorts of problems – political, administrative, social, financial, but never lost their desire for cinema, their desire to create or their desire to show films made by others. Often in this kind of situation, artists become bitter and you can understand that. But not them! They never complained, they never posed as victims. In making

the film I was also overcoming my own frustrations. One can often look at the world pessimistically, but when you are close to these men you feel cured of defeatism.

**Ibrahim, Suleiman, Manar and Altayeb are touching because they each take care of each other.**

It's also a film about friendship which says "Yes, things are bad, but all the same friendship remains a powerful thing". These men sustain each other mutually, when one is depressed the others encourage him. They stand together in solidarity to each other.

**What is the deepest sense of combat for these old cineastes and for the film?**

We must make things we believe in even if we are facing obstacles. They were conscious of their frailty, their age, the limit of their strength, but they act nonetheless.

The first time that I encountered Ibrahim Shaddad he asked me questions in order to test me: "You studied abroad and you come back to Sudan, you have made the same mistake as we did 40 years ago. Is your family rich?" - I told him no - "Do you have links with the Government?" - No - "Then you have 2 choices: Going back to Europe to film love stories and be happy as a filmmaker or stay in Sudan and we will keep you a seat on our bench in the waiting room".

In reality, they are not really waiting on a bench, they are fragile, but their vulnerability is also a strength, here lies the deepest sense of my film.

These 4 men are invincible in their fragility. To be preoccupied by Art in a country governed by fascists is a force, a philosophy of hope. What they made, what they lived, and their profound desires are a proof that their fragility can never be defeated. It is a philosophical film rather than historical since the history of Sudanese cinema only exists through missing images that would, in a way, have been erased before being even printed.

Yet these men maintained a very strong desire for cinema and beauty despite this non-accomplishment. To me, these unauthorised cineastes are winners who redefined the notion of success. They didn't accomplish their childhood dreams, but they stayed faithful to themselves without compromising. They were passionate.

**Nonetheless they made films, superb extracts are shown in your film**

Yes, they are marvellous and demanding. Ibrahim was the best student when he did his cinema studies in Germany. His graduation film *Hunting Party* was shown in Tokyo in a festival of films made by film students and he won the first prize. When he evokes the past he never says "I wasted my life", on the contrary.

**How did you make your stylistic choices?**

I am inspired by a cinema which is not obsessed by its power of seduction for the audience and has confidence in its perspective. For example, I never put any music over the film intentionally as I preferred to find an internal music. I wanted the film

to be faithful to its characters, to their rhythm, to the speed of their thought, to their way of moving and being in the world. It was also a film about abandoned spaces and landscapes that the government tried to wipe out. Finally I wanted to follow the gaze of these cineastes. If one follows the information in Sudan, there is each day news which can lead to depression. Yesterday some young people were massacred, and their bodies thrown in the Nile. I tried to leave out this worrisome part of the Sudanese reality which can drive you crazy. I did not want to highlight the government by giving it too much importance in my film, I wanted to preserve the contemplative slowness of my characters, their space for reflection, their aura of dignity. When Ibrahim tells the story about being arrested, he doesn't describe the details of the torture, but the details of his cell where he was imprisoned: that sums up his ethic and his way to resist the horrors he went through.

**The Sudanese government is not in the film, but you feel its power through the administrative difficulties which are faced by the SFG. Although it is not an angry film, would you say Talking about Trees is also a political film?**

Of course! It is dedicated to these four people who have borne the weight and the difficulties of an oppressive state. These people and my film try to push the presence of the state outside the frame, not through fear, but in order to give it less importance. I didn't want to make a film about the situation in Sudan, but to reveal it by little touches in showing its Kafkaesque aspects. Also, I didn't want to show the political implications or historical indications about Sudan, keeping back any frontal denunciation.

Actually, just making this film is a way to get engaged and fight. We filmed without authorisation and remained vague about the intention of the film with the police and the government. For me the error of the Sudanese opposition was to believe that the situation would change by informing the world, but in fact the world got used to the Sudanese situation. Exasperated, the Sudanese people realized that those in power reacted only to economic injustices and not to atrocities committed by a dictator. Sudanese reality has therefore evolved thanks to the courage of millions of women and men and not through the reportage of the international media.

**There is also the very funny scene where a screening is interrupted by the call of the muezzin. Was that a critical touch on the omnipresence of religion?**

I've always loved the sound of a call to prayer in the early hours of the morning. The beautiful voice and the melody of the muezzin was helping me to organize my day and my thoughts. Nevertheless, when this call goes through several very loud loudspeakers which distort the sound, it does lose its beauty, and becomes almost comical without any profundity. My film even if it does not put religion at the centre, shows how the Sudanese government uses it to dominate people's lives. Muslim religion, profoundly anchored in the life of the Sudanese, is characterised by a popular Sufism which preaches through literature and poetry, social solidarity and tolerance. I feel very close to that heritage. But since the arrival of the Islamists in Sudanese political life, they have wanted to monopolise Islam for themselves to transform it into something of commercial value in the service of the dictatorship.

The life of Sudanese people has become changed, judged and scrutinised by the people in power. The dictatorship pretended that its mission was to purify religion and to bring Islam to a population who knew it and was already practising it. To intimidate the opposition and hide the misery and corruption of the power, a sort of competition was imposed on the Sudanese: each person had to prove that he was more pious than the other in order to have work, to succeed in commerce or to protect himself from the government...

Happily, the Sudanese people has had enough of this hypocrisy and finally ended up by revolting. It was both magnificent and funny to see at the democratic march during the recent revolution in Sudan groups of Sufis crying out: "Islamists are the enemy of Allah!"

**You worked with the French editor Nelly Qu ttier.**

It was a real chance because we have the same taste for patient, contemplative cinema. Sometimes she reduced my tendency to excessive contemplation by adjustments which were always very precise. It is excellent, because Nelly all at once fell in love with these four characters and wanted them to be all in the frame but it was very difficult! And we soon felt this film had no need for music but to be listened to. The phase of editing was a confirmation of my intuition while shooting. It was important to watch them watching. Certain spectators have remarked that I was often filming Ibrahim's head and that was because I wanted to position myself in his own vision.

**Will the film be shown in Sudan?**

We will try our best to organize a screening in the Revolution Cinema where it was filmed. The SFG now owns an inflatable screen, thanks to which we can show the film in other places. Today with the revolution these things are possible. Even if the political equilibrium is fragile between the military and the democrats, one can't deny that things are changing. So yes, I believe one can show the film without too many problems. We are in the moment where we can test out the limits of a new of liberty.

**To use the formulation of Ibrahim, are you now going to film love stories in Europe or stay on the Sudanese bench? Or a bit of both?**

I hope to continue to make films in Sudan. Cinema is important for me just as much as education, culture, justice which are many urgent things that need to be reconstructed in Sudan. I also have a French project. I want to work on the two fronts with Sudanese stories and French stories as those are the two geographies which I know the best.

Interview done September 2019