

Pathways to African Horror: An Interview with Ann Sarafina Nneoha, Founder of the Africa International Horror Film Festival

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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**Pathways to African Horror:
An Interview with Ann Sarafina Nneoha,
Founder of the Africa International Horror Film Festival**

Sonia Lupher

This interview took place via email in September/October 2022. Through the aspects of my research that concern horror film festivals, I have long noted the dearth of genre film festivals hosted within the African continent. This is why, when I chanced across the [Africa International Horror Film Festival](#) earlier this year, I found that it added a much-needed breath of fresh air into the global landscape of horror film festivals. The only other horror film festival on the African continent ([South African Horror Fest](#)) concluded its 18th edition in November 2022, marking it as a long-running and well-established festival. However, Africa International Horror Film Festival is the first—and only—film festival in the world devoted to screening primarily African-made horror films, including a large concentration of shorts. Founded by Ann Sarafina Nneoha in 2021, the Africa International Horror Film Festival's first edition screened 80 short films and 12 features from around the world, including African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa.

Particularly within the last twenty years, the horror genre has become ripe with voices across the globe. Over the course of my research, I have interviewed or spoken with filmmakers such as Amanda Nell Eu (Malaysia), Aislinn Clarke (Northern Ireland), and Mattie Do (Laos) who are passionate about exploring urban and folk legends from their individual contexts, leading to films like *It's Easier to Raise Cattle* (2017), *The Devil's Doorway* (2018), and *Dearest Sister* (2016). In turn, this passion matches the hunger of audiences eager to see them. Despite the ever-expanding popularity and growth of the horror genre on a global scale, however, African horror rarely exports beyond its individual national boundaries. The ample material located in African legends and superstition (as Ann Sarafina Nneoha outlines in the interview below) would undoubtedly find voracious genre audiences within and beyond the African continent. Often, horror films made in Africa are co-productions with European countries, such as France (*Atlantics*, 2019) and the UK (*His House*, 2020), and created by filmmakers that belong to the African diaspora within

those countries. As is the case in North America and elsewhere, the majority of African filmmakers working in horror make short films and face budget constraints. However, the sheer amount of horror film festivals available to filmmakers in the Americas, Europe, and elsewhere offers filmmakers the possibility of developing and maintaining ties with their peers on a local or global scale. For many reasons—chiefly the lack of horror festivals in Africa—these opportunities are not often available to genre filmmakers in Africa.

Enter Ann Sarafina Nneoha, who transitioned from a career in law to filmmaking in 2018 and soon after took the initiative to found the African International Horror Film Festival. As she states in the interview below, she began the festival with the intention to “create more pathways and revive the African Horror Genre.” She is a genre and documentary filmmaker, and a member of the Directors Guild of Nigeria. Her personal works can all be found on her [official YouTube page](#). Below, Nneoha discusses her motivations for founding the film festival and offers some insight into the state of African horror in the twenty-first century as one of the foremost experts on this topic worldwide.



Figure 1: Ann Sarafina Nneoha

Sonia Lupher: You hold a wide range of roles as festival director/founder, lawyer, and writer. In your film work, you often work in documentaries? Do you also write or direct horror films, or have plans to?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: Yes, I also write and direct horror films. My first short film was a horror film, titled *Facebook Friend*. I wrote and directed the film in 2019 shortly after I graduated from law school. Since then, I have written horror films both short and feature-length but basically for my clients. Most of them haven’t been shot. I also have two horror feature-length films on my script shelf. I plan to direct them next year.

SL: I'd love to learn about the formation of AIHFF. What motivated you to found the festival?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: Well, African International Horror Film Festival started as a passion project last year, 2021. As a filmmaker who has always fancied "Dark Art," I wondered why a genre like that isn't celebrated enough in Africa. I also have a couple of friends who loved this style of art and when we openly talk about how much we love the horror genre, we're not taken seriously. In fact, people wonder if all is well with us as though it's taboo to love horror stories.

I also thought about how horror is interwoven in our storytelling as Africans and yet we hardly tell these stories. Creating a platform like Africa International Horror Film Festival was a step taken in an effort to revive the horror genre in Africa and allow films in that category to take their rightful place in the commercial horror market.

SL: What is the festival's mission?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: AIHFF's goal is to create more pathways and revive the African Horror Genre. This will be achieved through collaborations and partnerships with other international genre festivals and creative platforms.

We also aim to reawaken the consciousness among African filmmakers and industry stakeholders on the need to explore other forms of storytelling deeply rooted in African culture and tradition.



Figure 2: Africa International Horror Film Festival's Official Logo

SL: What was the process like from initial idea to planning stages to the inaugural festival edition in October 2021?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: Honestly, it was tough. Prior to starting the festival, I had never worked in a film festival. Though I had attended some festivals I had no idea what went on behind the scenes. So, I had to do a lot of research on how to set up a film festival. Some of the festivals I researched on were [Screamfeast](#), [South African Horrorfest](#), and [Africa International Film Festival](#). I also attended some workshops on film festivals.

Midway I realized that I can never be fully ready to start this. So, I dived right in, opened an account on FilmFreeway, put out a call for submission, and promoted it a lot on my personal page and film groups.

I also spoke to other passionate horror filmmakers and they jumped right in. We had a series of meetings and dedicated a lot of time to watching the submitted films—about 4,000 of them.

As the slash judges, we picked the best films, then passed them on to our final jury to pick the winners. Hosting the festival from the 29th to the 31st of October was very deliberate considering that World Halloween Day falls on the 31st.

The first edition taught me that you need a village to run a festival. We secured lots of brand partnerships from media to event coverage, marketing, and locations. We also had some volunteers join us during the festival. They all came with a burning passion to see the festival to the end and it was such a beautiful sight.

We reached out and invited lots of industry professionals and had them on our panel sessions. My team and I learned a lot of lessons from the first edition and promised to make the 2nd edition, bigger and better.

SL: How do you anticipate the festival changing in its second edition, slated for October 2022?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: A lot is changing! First, this second edition is themed, “Our Story, Voice, and Identity.” We are going back to our roots and culture and learning how they drive the African Horror Narrative.

The events lined up for the festival include, free film screenings, master classes, panel discussions, workshops, and award Presentations. We are also organizing an African-themed Halloween Party which we have named, “Afroween Party.”

There will also be masquerade performances, all geared towards entertaining, enlightening, and elevating our audience and guests.

SL: Who else is involved with screening submissions and running the festival?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: I'm currently working with a team of three. Love Nebo is our marketing and branding consultant. Dhee Sylvester is working as our creative and design lead while Juliet Ezeigwe is our Media Lead.

SL: How would you describe the horror film/fan community in Lagos? (In terms of audience demographics, types of events that exist around horror apart from AIHFF?)

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: The horror film/fan community is an encouraging one, from the turn-up. I have noticed when pubs in Lagos organize Halloween parties every October, these events resonate more with the millennials.

SL: In addition to the festival, AIHFF also held a standalone masterclass, "Telling an African Horror Story," in February 2022 with South African director Beer Adriaanse.

SL: How did this event come about, and do you plan to hold similar events in the future?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: Yes, we wanted to keep the horror narrative going even as the first edition had ended. And so we decided to reach out to filmmakers who had directed popular African Horror Films. Beer Adriaanse was one of the directors we reached out to and he had directed *Parable*, a Netflix original. It's one of the very few African horror films we have on Netflix. And so, we invited him to share his insights on how Africans can tell relatable African Horror Stories.

We had other masterclasses on topics like, "Tackling social issues with the horror genre." Our aim is to organize these masterclasses as often as possible. We are not only creating awareness for the African Horror Genre but also imparting knowledge.

SL: Of the films selected in 2021, I see that the festival truly does represent horror across Africa and internationally. You programmed films from Nigeria, Uganda, Namibia, Egypt, and South Africa, but also from Ireland, Chile, the Philippines, and many other countries. Were any of the filmmakers from outside of Nigeria in attendance at the festival?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: No. Filmmakers from outside Nigeria whose films we screened were unable to attend mostly because of the unavailability of travel funds.

SL: African horror is rarely distributed in North America, and many scholars, critics, and fans outside of Africa are unfamiliar with its horror film industry. Without conflating regional differences and taking Africa's size into account, how would you describe some common traits of African horror (in formal or narrative terms, or both)? What are some themes/topics you often see in African horror films (feature-length and/or short)?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: African Horror is majorly driven by our folk tales, culture, and tradition. In my culture especially, which is the Igbo culture, there's a very close bond between life and death. And that's why our houses are littered with the graves of our departed ancestors. We honestly don't believe in burying our loved ones at a public graveyard. As long as the person has close family members—a spouse and children, he or she deserves to be given a befitting burial.

And it doesn't just end there, sacrifices and prayers are offered at the graves yearly, a subtle reminder that death is part of our existence and the departed souls will continually be part of our lives.

That's why our stories revolve around these beliefs and superstitions, lacing them with themes like reincarnation, burial rites, ghosts, demonic possessions, witchcraft, and hauntings. Because our culture is more in tune with the supernatural, this sub-genre is mostly relatable in our continent.

There are also true-life horrors like the killing of witches, kidnapping and harvesting human parts for money rituals or political motives or pastors offering rituals to brainwash and attract more followers to their church.

As Africans, we grew up digesting a lot of cautionary horrific tales from our parents. They would say, “Don’t go to their auntie’s house, she is a witch”; “If you pick money on the road, you will turn into a ‘yam’ ”; “Don’t allow a baby to look into a mirror at midnight”; “If you hear a baby crying outside at midnight, that’s a bush baby, don’t go out else you’ll die.” I could go on and on.

They told us these stories to keep us in check so that we don’t go out at night, pick edibles or money from the road, or accept gifts from strangers. As much as these were cautionary tales, over time, they became part of us. Now that we are all adults, we know these things never happened but subconsciously, we can’t shake them off.

As much as we are embracing our cultures and traditions, it’s still important that the stories are internationally relevant and commercially viable. The goal is to find a balance between our cultural narratives and global issues.

SL: By virtue of your role as AIHFF’s director and founder, you are among the foremost experts in contemporary African horror. What would you say are some key differences (thematic, formal, or otherwise) between the feature-length African horror films you’ve seen and the short African films you’ve seen?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: Aside from the obvious length differences, there are no other technical differences between short and feature-length African horror films. Aesthetically, both film types employ the same casting process, lighting, production design, and photography.

SL: Do you believe most African filmmakers who make short horror films would like to make feature-length films? What value/benefit do they see in the short film form?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: I think one of the primary factors why filmmakers make short horror films is the lack of resources. If they have access to better resources, like funds, they will definitely be making feature-length films.

Aside from that, most filmmakers making short films are just starting out in their careers and so are experimenting, testing their creativity by shooting short horror films. It’s easy to get a group of friends together to shoot your film.

SL: What do you find most compelling or unique about short-form horror?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: I think it's fast and creative, the filmmaker expresses an idea, and gets to the story without pointless diversions. That's where your creativity is tested as a filmmaker.

SL: In my cursory research, I have come across very few short horror films from Africa (the ones I have found outside of the AIHFF program include *The Bodies*, 2019; *Good Help*, 2019; *How May I Help You Again?*, 2020; and *The Nightmare on Broad Street*, 2020, as well as a handful listed on the [African Film Database](#)). What are among the most impressive and memorable African short horror films you would recommend to viewers?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: I will recommend *Juju Stories* (2021, Nigeria), *Ojuju* (2014, Nigeria), *Ounje Ale* (2019, Nigeria), *Atunmarilaka* (2020, Nigeria), *Anuli*, and *FTFO V* (2020, Nigeria).

SL: What is your sense about how horror storytelling is evolving in Africa? What do you expect to see more or less of in the future?

Ann Sarafina Nneoha: Judging from the horror films from our continent distributed worldwide, especially on platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, there's been a lot of improvement. Just recently, *Juju Stories*, a collection of 3 short horror films by Nigerian filmmakers was acquired by Amazon Prime Video.

I'm looking forward to having more African horror films getting more international distributions, and piquing the interest of the global audience.

Sonia Lupher is a Visiting Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, where she completed her PhD. She is the founder and editor of the digital humanities project "Cut-Throat Women: A Database of Women Who Make Horror," which catalogues the work of hundreds of female practitioners in horror media production. Her scholarship has appeared in *Jump Cut*, *Critical Quarterly*, and *Studies in the Fantastic*.

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