

Renowned South African filmmaker receives prestigious honour from France

On Monday, 12 May 2025, celebrated South African screenwriter, director and film producer, **Ramadan Suleman**, was awarded one of France's highest cultural distinctions: the title of *Officier dans l'ordre national des arts et des lettres* (Officer in the National Order of Arts and Letters). The honour was conferred by Ambassador of France to South Africa, Lesotho and Malawi, **HE Mr. David Martinon**.

This recognition follows Suleman's initial knighthood into the order in 2013 and places him among esteemed company, including South African arts icon, Dr. Esther Mahlangu. Suleman received this coveted award from the French Minister of Culture in celebration of his enduring contributions to the South African audiovisual landscape and tireless commitment to strengthening the cultural ties between South Africa and France.

At the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, Suleman's career took off with support from the French Embassy's cultural programme, after his co-founded *Dhlomo Theatre* was shut down by the regime. It was through this support that he completed notable training at the *Ateliers Varan* in Paris. This pivotal moment set him on a course that would shape local cinema and deepen collaboration with France.

A pioneer through-and-through, in 1997 he directed one of the first French-South African co-productions, *Fools*—his debut feature adapted from Njabulo Ndebele's novella— which won the *Leopard d'Argent* at Locarno and the *European Prize* at FESPACO. Suleman has stated that he has “never directed a piece of work without France.” His latest work, *Spinners*, a co-produced series between the two countries, became the first African series to be selected for the *Canneseries* festival in 2023—an unequivocal testament to the Franco-African creative bridge he is helping build.

Whether fiction or documentary, Suleman's work is unmistakably Pan-African: it brings township struggles, memory, and resilience into dialogue from Lagos to Libreville, Paris to Porto Novo. Equally committed to nurturing emerging talent, in 1995, he co-founded *Natives at Large*, a production company devoted to amplifying black storytellers in South Africa. Between 2014 and 2017 alone, the company produced over 30 short films by first-time filmmakers, many of which gained recognition on local and international stages. Today, Suleman is also an active member of the *Friends of IFAS*, the French Institute of South Africa's (IFAS) advisory board to which he contributes a wealth of advice and his extensive knowledge of the local ecosystem.

“Ramadan Suleman's journey—from co-founding a black-owned theatre under apartheid to commanding the great stages of international cinema—is a story of passion, vision, and

collaboration. His films have carved space for hard truths and poetic reflection, his partnerships with French public and private institutions have built bridges that enrich both countries, and his mentorship has already launched dozens of filmmakers on their own paths,” said Ambassador Martinon.

It was especially meaningful that this honour was conferred on the same day that that **IFAS celebrated its 30th anniversary** at the French Residence in Pretoria, paying tribute to an enduring partnership that has shaped the French Institute’s story from the very beginning.

“France was the country that produced my first feature film, followed by most of my subsequent films. It is not a coincidence or an accident that we are united here to honour me on the 30th anniversary of the French Institute of South Africa, because it was that first scholarship from France that launched my career”, Suleman said during the event.

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