

Video Boom: Nigeria and Ghana¹

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The last fifteen years have seen the spectacular eruption of video films in Nigeria and Ghana—feature films that are shot cheaply on video and sold or rented as video cassettes or video compact discs.² Hundreds of these videos have been made in Ghana, and Nigeria now produces more than a thousand of them every year (Abua). They are broadcast on television all over Anglophone Africa and are shown in theaters, small video parlors, and even in rural villages where itinerant exhibitors make the rounds with televisions, video cassette players, and generators. From a commercial point of view, these video films are the great success story of African cinema, the only instance in which the local media environment is dominated by local producers working in direct relationship with an African audience entirely outside the framework of governmental and European assistance and of international film festivals that has structured so much of African cinema. From a cultural point of view, the videos are one of the greatest explosions of popular culture the continent has ever seen (Haynes and Okome).

Video film production began almost simultaneously in Ghana and Nigeria in the late 1980s, in both cases as the result of general economic collapse that made celluloid film impossibly expensive. A sharp increase in violent crime in Nigeria was also making it dangerous to go out at night to a cinema. In Ghana, the way was led by people like Willy Akuffo, a film projectionist, and Socrate Safo, who was studying to become an auto mechanic. Self-taught as filmmakers, they were outsiders to the Ghanaian filmmaking establishment, but their tales of witchcraft and sentimental romance immediately struck a chord with their audience.

In Nigeria, the first into the field were artists from the Yoruba traveling theater, who had been working on television for decades and had produced scores of celluloid films in the 1970s and '80s. Video projectors allowed them to continue screening their work in the informal venues that they had been hiring for film shows. Kenneth Nnebue, an Igbo businessman who had been dealing in electronic goods and imported

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared in the Nigerian Daily *The Guardian*. The version appearing here is rewritten for *Postcolonial Text*.

² For an overview of the video industry in Ghana, see Aveh and Meyer, "Ghanaian Popular Cinema"; for Nigeria, see Haynes, *Nigerian Video Films*, Barrot, Okome and Haynes, and McCall, "Nollywood".

video cassettes, had the idea of selling films on cassette rather than charging admission for screenings. He began by producing several films with Yoruba traveling theater artists, in Yoruba, but then in 1992 he wrote and produced an Igbo-language film, *Living in Bondage*. It was a sensation in the Igbo community; an English-subtitled version and a sequel quickly followed as Nnebue realized there was a national market for this kind of product. Suddenly there was a horde of Igbo film producers where none had existed before, nearly all of them untrained in filmmaking and working with tiny budgets. In 1994, Nnebue launched into English-language production with *Glamour Girls*. Once again, he immediately had many imitators. This was a particularly cash-starved moment for Nigerian television production, and many television personnel, including the soap opera director Amaka Igwe and her stars Richard Mofe-Damijo and Ego Boyo, moved into the video market. In northern Nigeria, videos in Hausa began to be made by amateur theater groups and by the authors of a kind of pamphlet literature often called “soyyaya” (love) because of its frequently romantic themes (Larkin, “Hausa Dramas” and “Indian Films”; Y. Adamu).

By the mid-1990s, Ghana was producing about 50 video films a year and Nigeria about 500 a year. In both countries the video boom was met with great hostility from the cultural establishment, which was appalled and embarrassed both by the low technical quality of the films and by the mentality they displayed, dominated by witchcraft and other forms of magic and by the imitation of the low, foreign, melodramatic form of the television serial. Because of the large capital investments required, celluloid cinema had always been closely regulated and sometimes supported by authorities, first colonial and then national, who were nervously concerned about the power of the medium and harnessed it to project cultural nationalist ideology and a favorable image of the country. Video production, in contrast, was possible as an informal sector activity, requiring only cheap technologies that were already widely available, and so it flourished as a form of popular culture in perfect indifference to what the authorities thought (Larkin, “Hausa Dramas” and *Media*). Market women are said to be at the demographic center of the video audience; the films are hawked in markets, motor parks, and even to motorists stuck in traffic jams, as well as by vendors with crude wooden shelves set up on the streets or in shops in popular neighborhoods that also sell pirated American, Indian, and Chinese videos and audio cassettes. In Ghana, a truck carrying a highlife band may be hired to parade through city streets to attract attention to a new film while a small army of hawkers in matching tee shirts tags along to sell cassettes.

The basic structures of the video business are similar in Nigeria and Ghana. The marketer/distributors, based in Opera Square in Accra and in Idumota Market in Lagos, with other Nigerian centers in the Igbo cities of Onitsha and Aba and the Hausa city of Kano, have effective control of the market. They are the main source of capital, as banks and other formal sector institutions are wary of the film business. Most of the marketers

were traders in electronics or other goods before getting into the film business; they are vigorously condemned by the filmmakers as semi-literates with no knowledge of cinema, throwing their weight around like the Hollywood moguls of old but without the far-sightedness or instinct for talent that built the American industry. They are resented for mandating storylines and casting and held responsible for the repetitious flogging of the same faces and plots, aiming only at quick returns on minimal investments by pandering to the lowest and most predictable tastes of their audiences.

They are also frequently accused of defrauding filmmakers. Cheating is endemic throughout the industry. Piracy is the bane of video filmmaking, but as Brian Larkin argues, it is also the enabling condition: the whole video film industry is built on an infrastructure created to pirate American, Indian, and Chinese films. Larkin also points out that because video technology is so cheap, light, and mobile, it is very difficult for governments or anyone else to control (“Degraded”). Marketers reproduce more copies of films than they acknowledge to the filmmakers; pirates simply dub and sell copies of popular films; television stations broadcast them without buying the rights; freelancers carry them abroad without the permission or knowledge of the filmmakers, selling them to marketers in Kenya, African grocery store owners in Germany, and website entrepreneurs in the US and the UK. In September 2004, when Gbenga Adewusi, an important producer, actor, and filmmaker, went with a detachment of police to Alaba International Market in Lagos to confront traders who were pirating his films, he was stabbed and the police were assaulted. The biggest problem of all, however, is the lost revenue from video rentals. In both Nigeria and Ghana there are many thousands of shops that rent video films but there is no mechanism for returning profits to the producers.

This extremely leaky distribution system, coupled with the sheer glut of films on the market, means that it is difficult to turn a decent profit on a film. Legend has it that a few films have sold a quarter of a million copies (at about US \$2.50 each), but currently Nigerian films are lucky to sell 60,000 copies, and in Ghana the average has sunk to about 5-10,000 copies. These modest sales keep budgets low: the average in Nigeria is perhaps \$20,000, with a high end around \$75,000, but the threat of piracy makes large investments risky. In Ghana, the budgets are much lower. The enormous number of films being made in Nigeria supports a cadre of experienced, full-time professional filmmakers, and they often shoot with respectable digital cameras, routinely employ digital special effects, and sometimes rent more exotic equipment such as Steady-Cams. But the low budgets show in the lack of script development and rehearsal time, the bad lighting and sound recording quality, and the minimal attention to sets, costumes, and makeup. The most workable business strategy is to make films as cheaply and quickly as possible, shooting in a week, trying to recoup the investment in the two weeks or so before the pirates can catch up, and then moving on to another film. Sequels are a standard way of

milking a successful project, as well as providing room for the luxuriantly overgrown plots that the audience seems to like. Chico Ejiro, known in the industry as “Mr. Prolific,” made 80 films in eight years; other directors such as Andy Amenechi and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen are not far behind.

Ghanaian filmmakers have the additional problem of competition from the Nigerians. In a pattern like the one that led to Hollywood’s world dominance, Nigeria’s larger home market (a quarter of the sub-Saharan African population lives in Nigeria) permits larger sales and, consequently, larger budgets and higher production values. The Nigerian films are also racier and more violent than Ghanaian ones, and while this is shocking to Ghanaian audiences, they pay for the titillation (Meyer, “Visions”). For a time Ghana had a system for screening new Ghanaian videos in a chain of government-owned theaters, thereby making a reliable profit, but the broadcast of videos on television has killed the audience for theatrical screenings. Ghanaian filmmakers feel buried under the Nigerian avalanche; Ghanaian production fell to perhaps a quarter of its previous level, which made it difficult for personnel to stay in the business full-time, before rebounding recently. There are some Nigerian-Ghanaian co-productions, but Ghanaians have come to see these as a method for Nigerians to further penetrate the Ghanaian market by putting some well-known Ghanaian faces in what is basically a Nigerian film.

Because of its smaller size, video production in Ghana is less differentiated than it is in Nigeria. Filmmaking is overwhelmingly centralized in Accra and is nearly all in English. (There have been some films in Twi, notably those of Kofi Yirenkyi, which have a folkloric flavor, and of the late comedian Santo, who came out of the stage tradition of Concert Party.) The low budgets have enforced the dominance of the genre of family melodrama, as this is the cheapest sort of film to make. Oriented towards female viewers, these stories are populated by long-suffering heroines, feckless husbands and their disreputable mistresses, lost and erring children, meddling in-laws, orphans, ghosts, witches, and assorted evil spirits; the protagonists are subjected to extraordinary persecutions, twists of destiny and fate, and various catastrophes such as lost employment and ruinous hospital bills that are easily recognizable to an audience struggling in an economy where the majority of the population lives on one dollar a day. A woman’s fertility is frequently at issue. Often a Christian pastor provides spiritual support and guidance and exorcizes demons. Birgit Meyer has described the rapid growth of Pentecostal culture in Ghana and its heavy influence over the videos (“Impossible,” “Power”). The Ghana Film Industry Corporation, the bearer of a government-sponsored nationalist tradition of filmmaking, produced a number of more secularly-minded, socially-conscious videos until its demise in 1996.

Nigerian video culture is riven by the same division between north and south that bedevils Nigerian politics. Southern films are sold in the north, but the northern films, always in Hausa, are never carried by the southern distribution system and are seldom subtitled. There is almost no

awareness of them in Lagos or Onitsha, apart from the neighborhoods where northerners live. Hausa cultural norms are different from, and much more restrictive than, those in the south (Larkin, “Theatres”), and this situation has become highly politicized with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the imposition of Shari’a law in the north. Northern filmmakers are locked in tense negotiations with various cultural authorities about what is permissible—any form of touching between lovers, let alone kissing, is currently not permitted in the Kano industry (Abdalla Uba Adamu et al, Krings). Instead, the lovers don matching clothes and sing and dance together in the manner of Indian films. As in India, a market for audio cassettes of film music has sprung up as an offshoot of the film industry, a phenomenon that has no equivalent in southern Nigeria, where song and dance numbers are very rare. Most Hausa films are highly moralistic, but most also contribute to an internal cultural debate about what gender roles should be, through their stories of romantic love, forced marriages, and jealousies in polygamous families (Larkin, “Indian Lovers,” “Itineraries”).

The most deeply rooted segment of the southern industry is the Yoruba one, which was built squarely on the Yoruba traveling theater tradition.³ A clannish network of artists from this tradition continues to make cheap, un-subtitled films of standard kinds (village tales of land or chieftaincy disputes and witchcraft, domestic conflicts that also frequently involve witchcraft, urban comedies) for a loyal audience. A new generation of Yoruba actors and filmmakers has come up since the end of stage performances. Yoruba filmmaking also extends to the work of Tunde Kelani, the most respected figure in the Nigerian video industry, who had a professional career as a cameraman in television and celluloid film before he began to direct videos and has had his films shown at numerous international film festivals. For films like *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo*, he mobilizes an impressive and diverse array of talent, from distinguished Yoruba literary figures such as his regular collaborator the playwright Professor Akinwumi Ishola, who wrote the screenplays, and the novelist Adebayo Faleti, who plays the part of the wise commentator Baba Opalaba, to eminent actors from the traveling theater (Lere Paimo), the universities (the late Larinde Akinleye), and television (Kunle Bamtefa). *Thunderbolt*, in English, adapted from a novel by Faleti, equally demonstrates the sly wit and warm humanism of Kelani’s sensibility.

Outside of the Yoruba enclave, Igbo businessmen largely control the video market. Filmmaking in the Igbo language has waxed and waned; most Igbo producers, directors, and actors have preferred to aim at the larger market that can be reached in English, even when making films with Igbo settings and Igbo casts and crews. A century ago standard

³ On the Yoruba traveling theater tradition, see especially Clark and Jeyifo; on the celluloid film phase, see Balogun and Ekwuazi; on the transition to video, Ogundele and Haynes, “Nigerian Cinema”. In her excellent book, Barber covers the entire arc of development.

dialects of Yoruba and Hausa were adopted as the basis for a written language, from which literary and theatrical traditions were developed. These processes have been much less successful in the Igbo case, making video production in the language more difficult as actors lack training in performing in Igbo and it is difficult to assemble a cast that speaks Igbo with the same local accent.

Half of Nigeria's population of roughly 130 million is neither Hausa, Yoruba, nor Igbo; about 250 other languages are spoken. Films have been produced in Edo, Urhobo, Itsekeri, Efik, Nupe, and other languages, including Pidgin, the lingua franca of southern Nigeria, but for the most part actors and filmmakers from ethnic minorities work in English. A number of important filmmakers are from the Niger Delta and from Edo State, just to the north, including the brothers Zeb and Chico Ejiro, Opa Williams, Fred Amata, Jeta Amata, Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, and Don Pedro Obaseki.

As in Ghana, family melodrama is the queen of Nigerian film genres, and for the same reasons: these soap-opera-like productions are inexpensive to make and appeal to an audience in which women predominate. (Women are less well represented behind the camera, although Amaka Igwe was one of the major early figures in the industry, the evangelist Rev. Helen Ukpabio is now one of the most successful film producers, and there are a number of other women writing, producing and directing films, such as Emem Isong.) Family melodrama provides the framework for an infinite number of themes and topics, often matters of earnest or scandalous social concern. Opa Williams's *Onome . . . Another Love* explores the tribulations of poverty and is set among Urhobo people, though the film takes place in Lagos and everyone speaks English (Okome, "Onome"). *Emotional Crack* (produced and written by Emem Isong) is about domestic violence and is the first Nigerian film to show a lesbian relationship. The explosive success of Nnebue's inaugural film *Living in Bondage* was due to its combination of a story of marital crisis with other themes that have continued to loom large in Nigerian videos: fascination with the forms of extravagant wealth on display in Lagos; a psycho-spiritual analysis of the restless ambition provoked by that display; attribution of such wealth to occult practices, especially money rituals involving human sacrifice; and a resolution provided by Christian exorcism (Haynes and Okome). A genre of "Christian videos" has been established in Nigeria, which to some extent is carried by its own distribution system based in churches such as Ukpabio's (Oha).

Other genres and sub-genres have arisen in waves that crest, driven by the imitative structure of the industry (dozens of filmmakers will jump on anything that seems to sell), and then recede but never entirely disappear. Romances were the order of the day in the mid-1990s, followed by "cultural epics," costume dramas set in a more or less realistic "traditional" past, such as *Igodo: Land of the Living Dead*, from the powerful Igbo producer Ojiofor Ezeanyaeche (OJ). In 1997 there was a new spate of films about money rituals made in response to a sensational

case of such practices that filled the newspapers. Nnebue's *Rituals* carries this theme furthest as a means of analyzing the social and political mess of contemporary Nigeria (Okome, "Writing"). The video boom began under the military dictatorship of Ibrahim Babangida and flourished under his even more murderous successor Sani Abacha, which encouraged filmmakers to shy away from directly approaching political topics (see Haynes, "Mobilizing"), but after the end of military rule in 1999 there began to be more films overtly concerned with national politics (Haynes, "Political"). Among the most impressive examples are Sam Onwuka's *Stubborn Grasshopper*, a thinly disguised representation of the Abacha regime, and his *Oil Village*, a thinly disguised representation of the judicial murder of the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the political crisis of his small ethnic minority, the Ogoni. Kelani's *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* take an allegorical approach but are direct and trenchant in their handling of contemporary politics. (The military man in the former looks very much like Abacha; the king in the latter is unmistakably the current President, Olusegun Obasanjo.)

At the turn of the millennium comedies were suddenly popular, Nkem Owoh (of *Osuofia in London*) establishing himself as the biggest star in this genre; the American action film was domesticated by directors such as Tecu Benson (*State of Emergency*) and Chico Ejiro; and a rash of films about vigilantes, notably Lancelot Imasuen's *Issakaba* series, was inspired by events in eastern Nigeria (McCall, "Juju"). Films about prostitutes and other loose-living women pushed the boundaries of sexual explicitness until the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board pushed back; in 2002 the Censors Board also mounted a concerted, but unsuccessful, campaign to drive "juju" out of the movies. Currently popular are films at least partially set abroad in the Nigerian and Ghanaian diasporas in Europe, the United States, or elsewhere, such as Bob Smith, Jr.'s pioneering *Mama Mia Italiana*, *Osuofia in London*, and Tade Ogidan's hit *Dangerous Twins*—a reflection of the economic importance of those communities and of their loyal patronage of video films.

The Ghanaian film industry is in crisis; the Nigerian industry is perpetually said to be so by people inside and outside the industry, but it keeps growing and is increasingly recognized by official bodies. Estimates of the current worth of the industry run up to \$200 million a year—the price of a single large Hollywood film, but in a severely damaged economy like Nigeria's, this is economically significant. Nigeria's President mentioned the film industry for the first time in his 2004 State of the Nation address, and his wife has chaired meetings devoted to its rationalization. In 2000 the Kano State government declared it was shutting down the Hausa video industry because it offended Hausa culture and Islam, but it had to relent when it was pointed out that the film business provided work for some 5,000 people and the filmmakers threatened to throw their political support to opposition candidates. In Lagos there are now frequent workshops and forums devoted to reforming the industry, to training its personnel, and to discussing the aesthetics and

meaning of films, sponsored by everyone from arts organizations to the national government and foreign embassies. More and more film festivals in Europe and the United States are showcasing Nigerian and Ghanaian films, and in Africa they are being sold and sometimes imitated from Sierra Leone to Tanzania. Until the basic problems of over-production, piracy, and the stultifying domination of the marketers are solved, budgets and therefore the quality of the films will remain so low that the videos will seldom be able to compete on equal terms with the rest of world cinema. They have, however, already achieved something astonishing by creating a vast and various African film culture on a scale the continent has never seen.

Filmography

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