

African Film Cultures

African Film Cultures:

Contexts of Creation and Circulation

Edited by

Winston Mano, Barbara Knorpp
and Añulika Agina

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



African Film Cultures: Contexts of Creation and Circulation

Edited by Winston Mano, Barbara Knorpp and Añulika Agina

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2017 by Winston Mano, Barbara Knorpp, Añulika Agina
and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without
the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8649-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8649-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Winston Mano, Barbara Knorpp and Añulika Agina	
Part 1: History, Memory and African Cinema	
Chapter One.....	14
Memory as Engagement: The Importance of Personal Histories in Sub-Saharan African Cinema Sheila Petty	
Chapter Two.....	31
Voicing the Archive: Anti-apartheid Protests by Students and Staff at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Elizabeth Louw	
Chapter Three.....	52
Between Ethnography and Fiction: Films by Jean Rouch in Francophone Africa Barbara Knorpp	
Chapter Four.....	74
Smooth-throated Nation: Hearing voices in <i>Red Dust</i> Christopher Letcher	
Part 2: Conflict, Representations and National Cinemas	
Chapter Five.....	94
A Humble Plea to Whom it May Concern: Kwaw Ansah's ... <i>Love of AA</i> as an Allegory for Negotiating Peace between Feuding Factions in Ghana Samuel Benagr and Solomon Yaw Dartey	

Chapter Six.....	112
Representations of a 'Black Middle Class' in South African film Caitlin Pearson	
Chapter Seven.....	129
Kinshasa's Cinemax: Reflections and Solutions to a Cinema's Purgatory in Democratic Republic of Congo Cecilia Zoppelletto	
Chapter Eight.....	145
Contemporary Cinema in Zimbabwe: The Radical <i>Minor Gesture</i> of Lobola Agnieszka Piotrowska	
Chapter Nine.....	162
Backstage with Fuzzy Wuzzy: Reflections on the Representational Influences on Filming <i>Our Beloved Sudan</i> Taghreed Elsanhoury	
Part 3: Circulation, Consumption and State Control	
Chapter Ten.....	188
The Role and Function of Film Festivals in Africa Imruh Bakari	
Chapter Eleven.....	206
Social Media and African Films: New Spaces, New Meanings Martin N. Ndlela	
Chapter Twelve.....	223
NFVCB's Ban of <i>Fuelling Poverty</i> (2012): Political Move or National Security? Añulika Agina	
Chapter Thirteen.....	241
Nollywood and the Nigerian Policy on Same-sex Relationships Francoise Ugochukwu	
Contributors.....	257

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is an outcome of research inspired by lively debates held at the annual African film conferences organised by the Africa Media Centre at the University of Westminster. We want to thank filmmakers, scholars, students and institutions which have supported the African film initiative at the University of Westminster. We are greatly indebted to Keith Shiri for his work on 'African film cultures' all over the world. He kindly shared his networks, knowledge and vast experience with us in a way that has helped deepen our insights. We also thank Winston Mano and Jane Thorburn for organising the annual African film conferences at the University of Westminster which have been a great inspiration to many people who work on African film. Thank you to staff and students at our respective universities, namely the University of Westminster, Pan-Atlantic University and the University College London (UCL). At the University of Westminster, we especially want to express our gratitude to all our friends and colleagues in the School of Media, Arts and Design (MAD). We are grateful to Samuel Kenneth Leigh, Alexia Shaw and Maria Way for their proofreading and to Victoria Carruthers of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for her wonderful support. Lastly, we want to thank all the contributors to the book.

Winston Mano, Barbara Knorpp and Añulika Agina

INTRODUCTION

WINSTON MANO, BARBARA KNORPP,
AND AÑULIKA AGINA

African film cultures, variously described as cinema, video or screen cultures, have grown rapidly and often under challenging conditions. Nigeria's Nollywood, for example, has eclipsed "Hollywood in Africa"¹ and is now contending with India's Bollywood for first place in the film world, in terms of the number of films produced per annum. Nollywood itself, as many Nigerians will tell you, is but one of the many film cultures in their country, with the Hausa films produced in Northern Nigeria being given as an example. Africa is a huge continent, with 54 official countries and a growing population that is estimated at one billion people. In Africa "film has emerged at a very crucial time in the history of Africa, not only as the voice of the people, but also as an answer to the drudgery of socio-economic existence characterised by high unemployment and contracting opportunities" (Ogunleye 2003, ix). The rapid growth and wide diversity of African film defies the self-serving invention of the separate Africas for which colonial Westerners wished. "The divide between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa is also a western concept. 'Sub-Saharan Africa' may have been a convenient phrase in titles in African studies (including film studies), to define the arbitrary separation of 'Arab Africa' from 'Black Africa', but this is not supported by Africans" (Stefanson 2014, 7). The reality of a united continent is evidenced by the pluralistic organisation of political institutions, such as the African Union (AU) and its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), together with pan-African events, including regular film festivals.

The continent therefore produces a diverse range of films from unique but shared backgrounds, often with similar concerns (Krings and Okome 2013; Stefanson and Petty 2014). As pointed above, the diversity of films produced "across genres, modes of film-making and countries of origin" points to a "plurality" rather than a "single Africa African Cinema" (McGuffie 2014, 31). Our view is that the catch-all phrases African cinema/African film must be unpacked, and that one "must instead

account for varied nuances internal to the vague category, delineating specific ways in which different cinematic contexts across Africa distinguish themselves and interact with each other, as well as how these systems are related to film industries and political economies outside the continent” (ibid). Specific contexts, regional and historical influences, must not be overlooked even though one must be aware that the films draw from other traditions. “The films produced out of many African countries are hybrid works-postmodern compilations of regional, national, continental and global histories and practices” (Wilmink 2014, 363). The task therefore involves complicating or rethinking “how local, national, and regional film cultures ‘connect’ globally, seeking polycentric, multi-directional, non-essentialised alternatives to Eurocentric theoretical and historical perspectives found in film as both an artistic medium and an academic field of study” (Ba and Higbee 2012, 1).

The arguments above set a relevant backdrop to the underlying framework for this book, which embraces both the unity and the diversity of film production cultures in Africa, as well as engaging with the complexity and diversity of the consumption side. The terms “transnational” or “global” are increasingly used to characterise how African films are now presented in a wider context (Krings and Okome, 2013).

This book is based on a collection of essays that deal with evolving African film cultures with local and global contexts. The emphasis of the volume lies in the understanding of film as being inseparable from an increasing independence of African culture. While African cinema has been intrinsically linked with overburdening colonial structures in regard to both its content and production systems, we aim to open up the debate in new directions. We would like to stress that the emerging trajectory of African film is related to, but different from, existing film cultures. Since film studies have traditionally concentrated on film as text, we would like to expand the notion of film to include important issues relating to reception, production, and distribution. These three areas have been frequently understudied and marginalized. Our focus is on the emerging global-local exigencies that are attuned to African ‘cultures’. Studying African film leads one to engage with the tensions between modernity and tradition in African societies, social-economic transformations, changing cultural traditions, and binding histories, together with globalising influences. The latest additions to film and video scholarship tend to concentrate on local film industries (Nollywood Stars, 2015; Global Nollywood, 2013) while those with a ‘continent-wide’ focus are often monographs. On the other hand, current publications on African Cinema

are certainly valuable contributions to the understanding of African Cinema in general. Lizelle Bisschoff and David Murphy, in their book *Africa's Lost Classics: New Histories of African Cinema* (2013), for instance, draw together the diverse and fragmented strands of African film history. Their volume recovers over 30 'lost' African classic films from 1920-2010 in order to provide a more complex genealogy and to begin to trace new histories of African filmmaking: from 1920s Egyptian melodramas through lost gems from apartheid South Africa to neglected works by great Francophone directors. This work has been possible through various film preservation projects in recent decades, which have allowed closer scrutiny of African film heritage and which give it back its long-deserved place in world film history. Our work complements Bisschoff and Murphy's insight into the past achievements of African classics by revealing more recent developments in contemporary filmmaking across the African continent. Another important publication from 2013 focuses on the achievements of ten directors in postcolonial African cinema (Murphy and Williams, 2013). How little is known about major African directors urgently recalls the injustices of an incongruently recorded world film history. In a special issue on African Cinema, published in *Sight and Sound* in 2007, Mark Cousins critically remarks (Cousins 2007, 26-30):

[It is a pity] that the innovations of African film have not had much influence. Surely Werner Herzog, who at the age of 18 ventured across the Sudan, would have collaborated with or have been affected by Sembène if he'd seen his work. Wouldn't Pier Paolo Pasolini, who filmed several times in Africa, have found a kindred spirit in Mambéty or Gerima? And might Sembène's combination of neorealism and poetry, his elevation of the objects and events of everyday life into something resonant, not have influenced the evolution of the great Iranian directors? Daryush Mehrjui started rethinking Iranian cinema in 1970, four years after Sembène's first important work. Arabic and Indian popular cinema have always found enthusiastic audiences in Africa, but the iniquities of film history have deprived us of a possible collaboration between the great African and Persian directors.

The above is certainly a wake up call and urges us to stop imagining such encounters, but instead to commission books, films, articles, seasons and documentaries that restore this film culture to its proper place. Then, perhaps, when we talk with our friends about the great films of the 1970s, we'll mention Mambéty in the same breath as Scorsese, Bertolucci or Wenders. Then *Ceddo* will be as familiar to us as *Taxi Driver*.

From the early films of the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, to current globally acclaimed Nigerian filmmakers, such as Kunle Afolayan or Tunde Kelani, Africa has produced films that both entertain and engage with the realities on the continent. Documentary films, the less-known, less-viewed media content in Africa, are also on the rise, with dedicated film festivals and awards both around the continent and beyond. Global media institutions have equally produced documentaries on the film industries in Africa in an attempt to uncover the nature and dynamics of such popular media and cinematic production. Sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed new and exciting film cultures that have not been sufficiently documented. In this volume we draw on specific filmmaking cases from around the continent, interrogating the logic and politics of representing African realities in various socio-economic and political milieus.

‘African Film Cultures’ bring together diverse intellectual thoughts from west, east and southern Africa. Contemporary African film cultures in Africa have many dimensions, with local and global connections. However, the questions that must be asked are: whose languages are spoken in African film? What are the patterns of the stories that have been told so far? What formats do African filmmakers use? What are the themes? How has funding affected what is produced? What are the politics of filmmaking in Africa? Apart from development, education and entertainment, has film on the continent advanced the emancipation of Africans? What has been the relationship between political independence and African film? This book offers an opportunity to review the literature on these important questions.

The growth of scholarly works on African cinema, broadly understood, is now undeniable and far-reaching. Prior to this time, the rich literature on Francophone African film practices comprised stand-alone materials, devoting attention to the celluloid filmmaking efforts of Sembène Ousmane, his contemporaries, and other African cineastes, following the decolonisation agenda of the 1960s. When the video film boom in Anglophone Africa that was brought about by Nigerian filmmakers took centre-stage in the 1990s, scholars too attended to these films in isolation. Whether accidentally or by design, it seemed as if one cinematic practice snubbed the other: a fact attested to by Krings and Okome (2013). Consequently, the scholarship followed the same trajectory.

However, the isolated readings of celluloid and video films are gradually paving the way to accommodating nuanced interpretive paradigms of both filmmaking cultures. Attempts to read these two filmmaking cultures

together, either by drawing similarities or contrasting them, have yielded rich insights into our understanding of African cinematic aesthetics (Haynes, 2010; Austen and Saul, 2010; Harrow, 2013; Ukadike, 2013; see also Bakari, in this volume). These scholarly efforts have drawn on comparative or (un)complementary apparatuses as dynamic ways to unpack the production and consumption of African cinema.

This book addresses one of such ways by bringing the discussion of films made on the African continent, about, by and for Africans, together under the same title. Our attention, in the collection of essays in this volume, is not solely focused on specific and nationalised representational modes of telling Africa, but also on the rich, complex and syncretic patterns of representation, circulation and consumption by which the continent's realities are constantly retold from within. Attention is equally given to the emerging, yet understudied, perspectives, which include new histories, film festivals, new spaces of spectatorship, and the politics of filming same-sex relationships. This reveals a kind of relationship between African film cultures and the dominant filmic traditions that have arguably come to define filmmaking, even for some of Africa's finest filmmakers.

As is evident from the essays, deep engagements with Lusophone (an exception is Petty's contribution) and Arab (North African) film cultures, with the exception of Sudan, are left out, not least because of a second reason for the emergence of this book. Some of the authors of the essays draw their inspiration from the debates formed at the annual film conferences run by the University of Westminster's African Media Centre that were organised by Keith Shiri, Winston Mano and Jane Thorburn. The current volume is thus reflective of some of the fascinating contributions from that series of conferences.

African film production and consumption patterns are evolving, particularly with the definitions of a *New Nollywood*. Some big budget African films now make the rounds at international festivals for a number of years before their major releases. The film enterprise has never lacked dynamism, neither at its beginning with Francophone cineastes, whose works were political, heavily didactic and subversive, nor with the video revolution, where critics point to undifferentiated production practices that shift between economic imperatives and an entertainment urge. Ukadike (2013) affirms that "each nation's cinema is a loose assortment of films by individual filmmakers of various backgrounds and with different agendas" (Ukadike 2013,4), and even if the "representation of continental issues" (ibid.) binds filmmakers together, there still exist differences in stylistic

decisions that are brought about by social, economic, cultural and political factors. These are factors which seem to be unified by postcolonial histories, but whose subtleties re-enact the notion of national or regional cinema.

African film production is also now rapidly globalising, with transnational productions seen more often than before, but each adopts or retains an African outlook that is determined by its storyline, characters, ownership, funding sources, language or belief systems. Unsurprisingly, Saul and Austen's (2010) *Viewing African Cinema*, Krings and Okome's (2013) *Global Nollywood*, and Tsika's (2015) *Nollywood Stars* devote considerable attention to the migratory propensities of African films. The globalising trends – although a more appropriate term in our view is *glocalising* – are made possible by co-productions (Letcher, in this volume), remakes and appropriations (Krings, 2010), migratory practices (Jedlowski, 2013) and even the economy of piracy (Larkin, 2008). These have invariably generated bigger, and critical, international audiences. As Krings asserts, “new local forms of media production in Tanzania have used Nigerian video films as “scripts” drawing on them in varying degrees” (2010, p. 75). Such collaborative film-making practices are inroads to the biggest film festivals and to the fame which indigenous productions are seldom guaranteed. However, the effects of such globalising initiatives on the film and its audience – and particularly on film music, as argued by Christopher Letcher in this volume, are routinely overlooked and understudied.

The rise of social media and multiple other new media platforms is also redefining the sites and spaces for the circulation and consumption of African films, hence the inclusion of a chapter by Martin N. Ndela on the subject. Mobile technology has facilitated viewership, which compels us to rethink the ‘home video’ appellation. Film spectatorship is no longer confined to beer parlours (Okome, 2007; Krings and Okome, 2013) or to domestic spaces (Larkin, 2008), but is now achieved through handheld devices connected to the Internet. While smarter and more interactive devices flood the market, software developers keep raising the ante- to ensure that view-on-demand options are available.

This book is divided into three main sections. The first addresses histories, memories and national cinemas. Four essays make up this section, with Sheila Petty's offering opening the discussion. Petty explores the significant role of the aesthetics of memory in narrative advancement, through character motivation and inhibition. By drawing on copious

examples from African films that were made between 1969 and 2004, with some being realised through transnational collaborations, Petty argues that memory functions as the “touchstone for subjectivity and critique” while offering characters engaging sites of affirmation, resistance and subversion. Elizabeth Louw takes up the discussion by demonstrating her thesis through a documentary production process of archive ‘voice’ protests by intellectuals in South Africa’s apartheid era. Louw’s chapter is engaged with responding to the key question of how the “interview situation, the passage of time and a profound change in the political dispensation impact on the emotions of the interviewees, memories, remembering and the construction of an added layer to the archive.” She succinctly demonstrates that the process of remembering is just as important as the events being memorialised. From an anthropological perspective, Barbara Knorpp traces the influence of the French director Jean Rouch’s ethnographic filmmaking to surrealism, performance theory, and Antonin Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*, practices which were reflected in the performing arts of modern Africa. More importantly, Rouch influenced a new generation of African documentary filmmakers and liberally oscillated between reality and fiction. At the same time, it is fair to say that Rouch’s contribution has been foregrounded at the expense of a new generation of African ethnographic filmmakers. This arises from the lack of copies available to African and international scholars. We are drawing attention to a lack of funding for African film archives, which has the effect of erasing the memories of previous generations. This negates cultural memory.

The last chapter in that section, Christopher Letcher’s *Smooth-Throated Nation: Hearing Voices in Red Dust*, deals with an oft-neglected aspect of cinema scholarship – film music and the politics of representation. Through an in-depth interview of the film composer and a textual analysis of *Red Dust*, a post-apartheid depiction of South Africa’s TRC, Letcher unpacks how compositional choices, inspired by production exigencies, impinge on – and, indeed, silence – the same voices the film sought to echo. The chapter raises pertinent questions about representing the other, and provides a basis for further research in that direction.

Section two looks at conflict, representations and national cinemas. Caitlin Pearson opens the debate by a critical analysis of the “representation of the black middle class in South African film”. In an unusual and refreshing approach she draws on sociological research into the economics of the newly emerging middle class in post-Apartheid South Africa and combines these results with references to popular movies. What comes to

the fore are complex political disputes on self-representation and image making. The ‘success’ of the new era is closely linked to an emerging consumer culture that makes use of the ‘brand’ of a new black middle class, despite the fact that many poorer people actually label themselves as middle class without having the financial means to buy the consumer goods that big corporations are advertising so aggressively. Pearson shows how popular cinema is partly to blame for fuelling the image of an affluent, liberated black middle class. She successfully demonstrates how this advertising strategy and national cinema cannot be separated from the national economy and identity politics.

The next chapter, written by the Ghanaian film scholars Samuel Benagr and Solomon Yaw, is entitled “A Humble Plea to Whom it May Concern: Kwaw Ansah’s ... *Love of AA* as an Allegory for Negotiating Peace between Feuding Factions in Ghana,” concerns Ghanaian political conflicts and peace negotiation strategies. The authors compare the politically charged situation of competing groups in Ghana with conflict resolution in filmmaking, and they suggest that film can offer peaceful solutions - by understanding the symbolic language of film as an allegory of real life. This is an interesting combination of conflict studies and film theory, something that is not often found in the same analysis, and that therefore offers an insightful and new perspective on filmmaking.

Taghreed Elsanhoury, a British-Sudanese filmmaker and anthropologist with long experience in television production, also works in a conflict zone. Her film *Our Beloved Sudan* (2011) is her first independent work after quitting television, and it aims to shed light on the division of Sudan and the people who are confronted with this difficult reality. Her chapter uses a well-known Rudyard Kipling poem about Africa as a starting point for a string of misunderstandings and misrepresentations. In an astutely self-critical analysis she elaborates on filmmaking, local and global views, and ethnography as a method. One of her smaller film projects, not mentioned here, concerns the dying of cinemas in Sudan and the memories of local residents of watching Indian melodramas in an open-air cinema that is now just a relic of their memories.

The following chapter, by Cecilia Zoppelletto, is an important contribution to the understanding of vanishing cinema architecture in Africa. Her piece “Kinshasa’s Cinemax: Reflections and Solutions to a Cinema’s Purgatory in the Democratic Republic of Congo” focuses on the changing cinema culture in Kinshasa, Congo. She describes how a new generation of consumers experience film solely through digital platforms and home

screenings, a total loss of the shared public experience of watching a film. Her writing is based on interviews with stakeholders, politicians and filmmakers who are trying hard to revive cinema-going in Kinshasa.

The last chapter in this section is an insightful and intimately reported production story about a film entitled *Lobola* (2014), by the Zimbabwean filmmaker Joe Njagu. What were the obstacles that the filmmakers faced? How did they manage to make a film in a country that has virtually no funding, and hardly any national cinema in its own right? How did they distribute their film, given the country's lack of cinemas and the harsh realities of DVD piracy? The writer/filmmaker, who is based in the UK but regularly works in Zimbabwe, gives a valuable background to what it means to make a film on a shoestring and not to lose hope. The film became a roaring success, partly due to the popularity of the main character, Munya Chidzonga, who became famous through a version of the Africa-wide version *Big Brother*.

The next part of the book looks at circulation, consumption and state control. Imruh Bakari's contribution on the role of film festivals for African Cinema is an insightful and careful description of how film festivals operate on both the national and pan-African levels. By giving us a history of festivals across the African continent, we begin to understand the complex politics of circulation and distribution. Bakari discusses early African festivals at Carthage (Tunisia) and FESPACO, in terms of their relationship with filmmakers, ideals of Pan-African solidarity, and the anti-imperialist politics that defined their institutional foundations in the 1960s and '70s. These are very different political perspectives from those of contemporary festivals, which are held in a much more globalised film economy and which are based on a new understanding of what African Cinema is supposed to be. Despite a common claim that African Cinema – with the death of cinema theatres all over the continent – is mainly relying on the festival circuit, we witness a newly emerging film culture through new media formats. The following chapter written by Martin N. Ndlela, with the title "Social Media and African Films: New Spaces, New Meanings," therefore tries to shed light on new forms of cinema and the role of social media on African film. By using ethnographic methods, Ndlela examines a variety of social media applications, including video-sharing platforms, social networks and messaging platforms that are increasingly influencing African film cultures. The popularity of YouTube in the African film and video scene, for instance, can be illustrated by the high levels of interactions with Nollywood films. YouTube has emerged as a significant distribution channel for African films, with millions of

viewers, especially for Nollywood and Ghanaian films, and with or without the consent of the producers. It is interesting to note that next to the use of common media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp, there is a strong increase in the number of indigenous media networks that predominantly serve African audiences: iROKOTv, which is referred to as the “Netflix of Africa”, is here a good example. With the availability of mobile phones to the majority of citizens, we might need to re-think what we mean by “film cultures” and, indeed, “cinema”. How has African cinema changed in terms of form and content? African documentary is one of the neglected genres in writings on African Cinema, which is why Añulika Agina’s article “NFVCB’s Ban of *Fuelling Poverty*: Political Move or National Security?” is especially compelling. Construed by the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) as being a film that is capable of “undermining national security,” the Nigerian activist film *Fuelling Poverty* (2012), by Ishaya Bako, sets out to portray the conflicting narratives that followed the January 1, 2012 fuel subsidy removal and the consequent protests in Nigeria. The filmmaker Ishaya Bako and his troubles with censorship are discussed alongside journalistic accounts, online publications, as well as semi-structured interviews with relevant film experts. Despite the ban, the film is still available on-line.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to a taboo subject that only recently entered the landscape of movies in Africa. Françoise Ugochukwu investigates same-sex relationships in Nollywood film. The production of new films that are regarded as being ‘beyond taboo’ offer an opportunity to re-consider controversial subjects like Islamic-Christianity encounters, inter-ethnic politics and sexual practices, in the light of current national events. This article considers the gradual introduction of same-sex relationships into Nigerian films, the federal government’s stand on the issue, and expressed public opinion from both within and outside the country in the context of globalisation.

References

- Bâ, S. M., and Higbee W. (2012) “Introduction: de-Westernising film studies” in Bâ, S.M., and Higbee W. eds. *De-westernizing Film Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-15.
- Cousins, M. (2007) “African Cinema Special section” in *Sight & Sound*; February 2007, Vol. 17 Issue 2, pp.26-35
- Harrow, K. (2013). *Trash: African Cinema from Below*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

- Haynes, J. (2011). "African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions" in *Situations* 1, no. 4, pp.67-90
- Jedlowski, A. (2013). "From Nollywood to Nollywood: Processes of Transnationalisation in the Nigerian Video Film Industry" in. M. Krings & O. Okome (Eds.), *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Krings, M. (2010). "Nollywood goes East: The Localization of Nigerian Video Films in Tanzania" in *Viewing African Cinema in the 21st Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, edited by Saul, Mahir, & Austen, Ralph A. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Krings, M., & Okome, O. (eds.). (2013). *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Larkin, B. (2008). *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ogunleye F (2003) "Preface" in Ogunleye F. ed. (2003) *African Video Film Today*. Manzini: Academic Publishers, pp. ix-xi.
- Okome, O. (2007). "Nollywood: Spectatorship, Audience and Sites of Consumption" in *Postcolonial Text*, 3(2), pp.1-21.
- Saul, M. & Austen, Ralph A. (Eds.). (2010). *Viewing African Cinema in the 21st Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press.
- McGuffie A. "What is African Cinema? The Industries of African Cinema" in Stefanson, B. and Petty, S. eds. *Directory of World Cinema Africa: Directory of World Cinema Africa* (Vol. 30). Bristol: Intellect Books, pp. 31-35.
- Stefanson, B (2014) "Introduction" in Stefanson, B. and Petty, S. eds. *Directory of World Cinema Africa: Directory of World Cinema Africa* (Vol. 30). Bristol: Intellect Books, pp. 6-9
- Stefanson, B. and Petty, S. eds. (2014). *Directory of World Cinema Africa* (Vol. 30). Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Tsika, Noah. (2015). *Nollywood Stars: Media and Migration in West Africa and the Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Ukadike, N. F. (2013). *African Cinema: Narratives, Perspectives and Poetics*. Choba: University of Port Harcourt Press
- Wilmink, M. (2014) "(Home) Video Films from Nigeria and Ghana" in Stefanson, B. and Petty, S. eds. *Directory of World Cinema Africa*. (Vol. 30). Bristol: Intellect Books, pp. 362-366.

Notes

¹ AFP (2010), “Nigeria’s Nollywood eclipsing Hollywood in Africa” in *The Independent* May 15, 2010, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/nigerias-nollywood-eclipsing-hollywood-in-africa-5540975.html> (accessed 1 April 2016).

PART 1:

HISTORY, MEMORY AND AFRICAN CINEMA

CHAPTER ONE

MEMORY AS ENGAGEMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL HISTORIES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN CINEMA

SHEILA PETTY

Abstract

This chapter explores how the aesthetic of memory and the process of memorialisation have been used in African Cinema as a means of teaching, reconnecting, and revitalizing cultures still under duress from globalized externalities. Although it may be observed that memory, in African Cinema, often serves as a site explicating trauma, it also opens debate on key cultural and/or historical issues aimed at creating an active spectatorship willing to explore solutions to social barriers. Memory may evoke trauma, but it also serves as a means of catalyzing change in society and this chapter looks at how memory is evoked in six films from across the chronology of African cinema. By considering these films as a continuous evolution of memory and memorialisation, it is possible to uncover linkages across the corpus of African cinema.

Keywords: memory; trauma; orality; innovation; aesthetics; memorialisation

In the current rush to uncover new ways of theorizing African cinema, there seems to be a desire to discard the so-called nativism and revolutionary rhetoric of the past in favour of newer and sexier catchphrases like “trash,” “post-colonial melancholia,” or “afropolitanism,” terms that seem to suggest that contemporary African cinema has somehow moved beyond the reach of its own histories. Older pedagogical structures such as memory, orality, witness camera aesthetics and realist narrative structures seem hopelessly outmoded when compared to the use of western-influenced camera and narrative aesthetics in

groundbreaking films such as Joseph Gai Ramaka's musical *Karmen Gei* (Senegal/France/Canada, 2001) or the experimental structure of Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Aristotle's Plot* (France/GB/Zimbabwe, 1997).

Rather than discarding the past of African Cinema, it may be more fruitful to recognize that it was the reading of the films that may have been too narrowly focused rather than the films themselves. Returning to earlier films with an eye to uncovering hidden aspects certainly broadens the discursive space to which these films, and their ideologies, have been exiled. It is also worthwhile noting that films frequently resist the categories into which they are shelved. In other words, in any analytical or theoretical approach, one aspect may be discarded in order to feature another. From this perspective, there is still much to discover in the relationship between early African films and their contemporary counterparts.

For these reasons, this chapter will explore how the aesthetic of memory and the process of "memorialisation" have been expressed across the corpus of African Cinema as a means of teaching, reconnecting, and revitalizing cultures still under duress from globalized externalities (Mhando and Tomaselli 2009: 34). Although it may be observed that memory in African Cinema often serves as a site explicating trauma, it also opens debate on key cultural and/or historical issues aimed at creating an active spectatorship willing to explore solutions to social barriers (34). As Martin Mhando and Keyan Tomaselli argue, the use of memory as an aesthetic in film "is often a reflection of a political project of sorts," framing the film as "a parasocial event that fictionalizes discourse with the intention of extending the political community of audiences" (36). Hence, although memory may evoke trauma, it also serves as a means of catalyzing change in society.

Given this context, this chapter will look briefly at how memory is evoked in six films across the chronology of African cinema. Early films, such as Med Hondo's *Soleil O* (Mauritania/France, 1969) and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (Senegal, 1974), both focusing on memory as orality, will demonstrate the wide range of expression memory is given. In Flora Gomes' *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* (Guinea-Bissau, 1992) and Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyènes* (Senegal 1992), memory functions as a site of personal trauma offering the possibility of change. Finally, in Ousmane Sembène's *Faat Kiné* (Senegal, 2000) and Maria João Ganga's *Hollow City* (Angola/Portugal, 2004), memory becomes the means by which the consequences of violence on Africans and the failures of post-

independence Africa are mapped. By looking at these films as a continuous evolution of memory and memorialisation, it is possible to uncover linkages across the corpus of African cinema.

The First Wave: Orality in Early African Films

As their industries rose from infancy after Independence, African filmmakers were faced with an extraordinary task: how could they redress, redirect and revitalize the racist colonial images presented to the world through western cinema? Failing to “decolonize the gaze and the mind,” early African cineastes sought to develop aesthetic constructs that would immediately declare to the world, “this is who I am; this is my country” (Barlet 2011: 139). Among many innovations was the incorporation of oral tradition, sometimes expressed as folklore, but more often encoded in the primacy given to the spoken word within the filmic structure. Oral tradition serves to place emphasis on the cultural space of the characters “by prioritizing repetitions, lulls in the narrative, and participatory bursts” and, in doing so, serves a pedagogical function that actively engages the spectator in the issue at hand (140).

Med Hondo’s film, *Soleil O* (Mauritania/France 1969) offers a case in point. One of the first feature films made by an African director, *Soleil O* differs from its African social realist contemporaries through the use of avant garde technique such as vignettes, pseudo street interviews and dramatic scenes to illustrate the journey of an unnamed black immigrant from passive assimilation of French cultural values to a politically aware African revolutionary. Throughout the film, different narration techniques are used to expose colonial bias and to expose the inner psychology of the black immigrant. For example, the film opens with a medium shot of a group of black men, staring out at the camera in fourth wall address. Their gaze, fixed at the spectator, forces direct engagement, not just with the men, but also with the narration that accompanies the shot. The narration itself, spoken by a male voice, evokes a memory of what African histories brought to the world, by pointing out that “We had our own literature, our own legal terms, our own religion, our own science and our own education.” Yet, by virtue of this statement, it is clear that this is a recoupment of African cultures’ worth, made necessary through the systemic degradation of indigenous cultural practices, languages and education by colonial occupiers.

Another way memory functions in the film is through the personal testimony of the black immigrant. Given the fragmentation of language and culture by colonial occupation, personal memory becomes a conduit of identity. The way *Soleil O* uses personal memory through narration is significant because it affords the spectator an opportunity to consider the consequences of “whitewashing” African cultural identities through assimilation. For example, the black immigrant arrives in Paris with the misguided notion that his education and willing adoption of France’s cultural superiority has made him French for, as the narration reveals, “One day I began to study your graphs, your thoughts, talk Shakespeare and Moliere, spout Rousseau. Sweet France, I am whitewashed by your culture.” Later, as he moves through a railway station, the narration states: “I am happy to tread your soil and discover your First City which is my capital, too.” Taken together, both these statements derive from a false expectation implanted by the black immigrant’s French education that equality with the colonizer was guaranteed by assimilation to the colonizer’s cultural values. This is made evident in a later scene when the black immigrant is refused an accounting job in a garage because of his race. When the garage’s proprietor looks the black immigrant up and down and says, “no,” the black immigrant’s narration reveals his confusion by stating ironically, “I know there’s no discrimination here. Isn’t this the land of liberty? I’m at home here... aren’t you and I equals?” Memory thus becomes a site of disjunction that opens a gap between past and present in order to create a space for the black immigrant’s eventual rediscovery of his Africanness.

The rediscovery of so-called authentic African values is a major preoccupation in early African cinema, which may be described as a cinema of recoupment. A number of films from this period focus on characters who start out as corrupt, Europeanized figures and through the course of the film either come to recognize the need to return to African cultural roots or are forced to do so as atonement for their actions. Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* falls into this category. The film follows the exploits of El Hadji, a middle-aged man, who begins the film as a Europeanized African businessman and ends it as a disgraced figure that now has the opportunity to reconfigure his life. As is the case with the black immigrant, El Hadji has subsumed his Africanity in favour of emulating European culture and materialism. During his wedding to his third wife, El Hadji’s new mother-in-law asks him to sit on a large mortar and straddle a large pestle, an African tradition associated with fecundity. When he angrily refuses, his mother-in-law disparages him, saying that he may believe he is European but in fact he is only an ordinary man. That

night he is stricken with xala, or impotence, and is unable to perform sexually with his young nubile wife. The xala become an open metaphor for the disintegration of his life.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the film is the sub-plot of the beggars who persistently congregate in the street in front of El Hadji's office. Comprised of individuals with physical deformities, the beggars come to represent over the course of the film the memory of a gentler, more compassionate African culture with values of generosity and sharing that greatly contrast with the corrupt, greedy world El Hadji lives in. For example, at El Hadji's wedding, the guests show off their fine clothes, admire the material wealth El Hadji has acquired for his bride through bridal gifts, descend on lavish dishes offered for consumption and conduct corrupt deals within the auspices of the wedding celebration. In a later scene, the beggars gather together for a simple communal meal of bread shared by all. They are respectful and supportive of each other, creating a communal social space in which all are equal. During the meal, one man reveals that he arrived in the city with his village's money to buy food, only to be robbed on the street. Now he feels that he cannot return, because he has failed in his mission and dishonoured himself. Gorgai, a blind beggar who functions as a nominal leader, gives the man his own coins in an act of compassion. The fact that Gorgai gives what little he has to redress the man's situation within a context where community space is valued, suggests that he, and the beggars, remember and practice their social tradition despite their low standing in the urban society they now live in.

El Hadji does not share the same respect for others. During a meeting with the President at his place of business, El Hadji notices the beggars hanging out in his street. He asks the President if something can be done about this "human rubbish," and the President immediately calls the security forces to have the beggars arrested. El Hadji's lack of charity once again draws attention to the fact that he is without empathy for the social conditions of anyone other than himself. Eventually, the film reveals that El Hadji has applied this principle to almost everyone in his business life. When his cheques bounce due to insufficient funds, El Hadji is summoned to a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce where he is confronted with accusations of having misappropriated funds from a major sale of rice in order to fund his wedding to his third wife. When El Hadji's cynical defence that he has done nothing worse than any of the businessmen sitting at the table with him fails to resonate with his accusers, he is dismissed from the Chamber of Commerce. Taken by his driver back to

his office, El Hadji finds that his office and all its contents have been confiscated by the government, including his beloved Mercedes which is pushed off down the street. Finally, he is confronted by the marabout who had previously cured his xala. Now, however, since El Hadji's cheque was refused for insufficient funds, the marabout reinstates the xala, leaving El Hadji in a state of complete shock. As each of these blows indicates, El Hadji is systematically stripped of his former status, and reduced, in effect, to the level of "human rubbish" he once disparaged.

When the driver tells Gorgai of El Hadji's tribulations, the blind beggar promises to restore El Hadji to manhood, ridding him of the xala without benefit of a fee. The driver expresses surprise at Gorgai's lack of commerce, but Gorgai once again affirms that he is not interested in El Hadji's wealth and that he will only undertake the cure if El Hadji obeys him completely and without question. The refusal of payment foreshadows the revenge to come, but it also suggests that there are more important elements in African culture than money. Later that night, the beggars arrive at the house of Adja, El Hadji's first wife, where he has taken refuge. In a symbolic dismantling of El Hadji's power, the beggars eat his food, drink his soda and occupy his material things, showing disdain for his wealth. El Hadji finally confronts them, only to be told by Gorgai that it was he who had cursed him with the xala in the first place. Gorgai explains that it was his revenge for a fraud El Hadji perpetrated when he was young, stripping Gorgai's family of their inheritance through forgery. Forced into prison, Gorgai lost his sight and became a beggar. Now he tells El Hadji that his only opportunity to become a man is to strip naked and allow the beggars to spit on him. The notion of revenge presented in the film is not simply a matter of redressing a wrong but rather serves to restore the honour of Gorgai's family, something more precious than the wealth El Hadji once had. Moreover, the memory of this incident, hidden for most of the film, drives the narrative forward: as El Hadji's career begins in theft and fraud, it is also undone by the same, closing a circle of retribution driven by his own greed. It is also significant here that Gorgai chooses a social humiliation as his method of revenge because it forces El Hadji to confront his crimes within African tradition rather than measure it by neo-colonial values. Thus, although El Hadji is shamed by his community, the act also opens the door to recoupment of African values.

The Second Wave: Independence Blues

Although there is no official line of demarcation, African films of the 1980s and 1990s might be described as the second phase of African filmmaking. In general (and there are exceptions), many of these films turned away from the simple polarity of tradition versus westernized African cultures to more complex depictions of African social issues where questions of individual responsibility often take centre stage. As regimes rose and fell after Independence in many African countries, the gap between the theoretical construct of Independence and the grim economic realities facing many African nations became increasingly obvious. Similarly, the notion of memory and how it assisted in constituting African identity became less didactic and more inductive in many narrative constructs.

Flora Gomes' *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* offers a case in point. Set in Guinea-Bissau in the early 1990s, the film explores the lives of several characters during the post-Independence period including Vincenté, the owner of a fish processing plant, Yonta, the daughter of Vincenté's friend who believes herself in love with him and Amilcar, Yonta's younger, exuberant brother. The film itself is difficult to categorize, certainly in terms of genre. As Kayode Ogunfolabi argues, *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* is a hybrid text that takes on "the issues in the revolutionary, mythical, naturalistic, and ironic models of African films and presents them as a problematic, necessary for grappling with modernity" (2006: 146). Comprised of several different story strands that culminate at a wedding, the film seeks to explicate how Independence has failed on several levels to bring about the changes it once promised.

The film opens with a group of children rolling inner tire tubes down a road, each one painted with a year that is significant to Guinea-Bissau's Independence and the coups that followed. Amilcar, who appears to be the nominal ringleader of the children, rolls an inner tube that is marked "2000," as if asking where Guinea-Bissau will be in the future. They are cut off by a truck driver who threatens an angry Amilcar. At that moment, Vincenté pulls up in his vehicle, and Amilcar tells the truck driver that Vincenté, who "scared" away the Portuguese, will protect him. The last comment introduces Vincenté as a "veteran of the revolution," and a man thus worthy of respect. Later, as Vincenté and Amilcar drive to the boy's home, Vincenté tells the child that although the truck driver was wrong to threaten him, he did not recognize that the children were holding a "commemoration" or "a kind of party to celebrate memory." He goes on to

note that “Some people forget things easily. Remembering is uncomfortable.” When Amilcar retorts that the things Vincenté and his father fought for “can’t have been fought for nothing,” Vincenté points out that those days are gone and “money’s the weapon now.” As this exchange suggests, the goals of Independence haunt the film’s narrative like a ghost, and serve as an unspoken counterpoint to the new materialism driving the country forward, however imperfectly.

Vincenté’s character epitomizes this duality. On the surface, he is a resourceful and charismatic leader, who promotes his business overseas, saves it from ruin by securing a loan for electricity to keep his freezers working as well as finding a client whose large-scale demand allows him to expand. He is also keenly aware that his business does not simply support the people who work there, but also a larger community of fisherman, fishing boats and women who ply his fish at market. As Ogunfolabi aptly describes him, “Vincenté is a modern Guinean who is immersed in the consumer culture and who is not circumscribed by national space” (2006: 149). Yet, this appears to be only a cloak he wears in public: in private, Vincenté is a troubled man who is estranged from his wife and children and speaks of his inner conflicts only to wooden fetishes of his gods. Later in the film, Vincenté is visited by Nando, an old comrade-in-arms for whom Vincenté has been searching. Dressed in traditional African attire, Nando is dishevelled and clearly living in an economic bracket well beneath that of Vincenté. When first arriving at the apartment, Nando, impressed by its opulence, asks if this is Vincenté’s “hut” now, revealing his background as a villager. Later Vincenté asks Nando how life is in the south, and Nando replies that it is the same as before the war. The comment makes Vincenté extol the benefits of relocating to Bissau, where Nando can enjoy the fruits of Independence, such as paved roads and increased wealth. He tells Nando that, although they once believed that Independence would come for everyone, it is clear that it has only come true for some. In his enthusiasm, Vincenté seems oblivious to the troubled expression on Nando’s face, and the next morning finds him gone from Vincenté’s apartment, leaving behind only his battered straw hat. The two scenes bring Vincenté’s inner conflict into collision with his reality: seeing himself through Nando’s eyes as a fraud, Vincenté is ultimately overcome by his memories of what Independence was supposed to mean to the nation and the money-obsessed culture that has taken its place. Nando’s departure thus sparks a kind of emotional breakdown for Vincenté, who comes to see himself literally as a vulture feeding off the carcass of Guinea-Bissau.

Amilcar embodies another type of memory in the film's structure. Named for Amilcar Cabral, "an indomitable revolutionary whose writings have influenced intellectuals, politicians, and cultural producers," the boy symbolizes a vital link between the past revolutionary history of the nation and its future success (Ukadike and Gomes 1995: 179). As Flora Gomes has suggested, Amilcar and the children in *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* are the "hope" and "future" of the nation, and will one day represent the "maturity" of thought and critical awareness "of African realities and African culture" that will lead Africa out of transition to a more stable period of growth (183). Just as it is the children who remember and commemorate Guinea-Bissau's revolutionary past, so too they take action outside the post-colonial box that entraps their elders. For example, after a neighbour is callously evicted by a new landlord from a house she had faithfully rented for over a decade, her belongings are moved into the street. Instead of taking this affront passively, the children, led by Amilcar, break the lock on the house's door and defiantly move the woman's belongings back in. This action, however pointless in the end, demonstrates how the children are free to fashion memory and action into a single force for compassion. Of all the characters in the film, it is they who are most representative of what the nation could be, if only its leaders were to set aside the western pursuit of materialism and serve the common social good.

Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas* shares with Gomes' *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* a critical view of western materialism. Unlike *The Blue Eyes of Yonta*, however, memory is not an inferred narrative element but rather functions as a primary driving force in the narrative. Thirty years prior to the beginning of the film's action, nineteen year-old Draman Drameh has a relationship with seventeen year-old Linguère Ramatou, whom he abandons in order to marry the wealthy Khoudia Lo. When Ramatou finds herself pregnant, she takes Drameh to court in order to force him to acknowledge the child. Drameh betrays her by paying two witnesses to say that they also slept with her, throwing the child's paternity into question. Ramatou then leaves her home in Colobane to become a prostitute and an extremely wealthy woman.

When the film begins, Drameh is an old man, a grocer and respected in his community. His life is turned upside down when a parade of drummers and singers suddenly appear in Colobane, announcing the imminent arrival of Ramatou who is now "wealthier than the world bank." The town's mayor and councillors gather together to discuss the arrival with much eagerness since Colobane has fallen on hard times, ravaged by drought and