Images and Memories of Home: African Video Movies in the Diaspora

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Abstract

The African video movie, more locally known as 'home video', is ambivalently received in the African diaspora; its reception ranges from a passionate enthusiasm at one end, qualified acceptance and mild tolerance in between, to a dismissive scepticism at the other. This wide gap in consensus and attitude among viewers of Africa's foremost but still emerging film industry can be attributed to a variety of reasons, and the aim of this paper is to explore these reasons.

However, this paper believes that 'Nollywood', the term by which the Nigerian version of this still emerging cultural phenomenon is known, is partly responsible for some of the negative perceptions and feelings which audiences, especially those in the African diaspora, have about this very robust, occasionally creative and highly profitable cultural industry. The themes, techniques and quality of the films, this paper argues, also contribute to some of the negative perception and reception of African video movies, especially among the diaspora viewers.

Introduction: Pitfalls of 'Colonial Mentality'

The term 'Nollywood' is a lazy Nigerianisation of Hollywood, following in the footsteps of the equally robust and financially successful Bollywood, the name adopted for the Indian film industry. What disappoints and riles a few of Nollywood's critics is the copycat syndrome which this represents. For these critics, the fact of the Nigerian video movie industry going the way of Bollywood in its naming is symptomatic of a much deeper malaise of unnecessary referentiality which African and former colonised peoples seem not to be able to get rid of from their collective psyche long after colonisation. One often wonders why it is that former colonised peoples feel this need to always refer back to the

'centre' in anything they do - it is almost as if an umbilical cord binds them forever to the 'mother' country.

Why the video movie and film industries of some developing countries should not only seek to comparatively position themselves to Hollywood, but would go to the extent of 'hollywoodising' their names as Bollywood (Bombay based Bengali film industry), Tollywood (Kolkata based), Dhallywood (Bengali but based in Dhaka, Bangladesh) Kollywood (Tamil), and now Nollywood have done beggars belief. Why Bollywood and Nollywood - successful as they have been in their own right without being anything close to or like Hollywood - should seek to invite such an unfair comparison. In fact, the two have managed to develop distinct identities of their own and thus do not require any validation by association from Hollywood which the similarity in name is intended to achieve. Why couldn't the Nigerian video movie industry just set out, as it is doing already, to make Nigerian and African video films and leave the comparisons to the audiences and critics? Nollywood certainly does not have the immense resources which Hollywood has, and therefore it ought to concentrate on defining its own filmic (video movie) aesthetic and make films governed by this aesthetic and ask to be judged by it. The producers, directors, designers and actors should ask themselves key questions, such as: why they are making the films, what kind of films they are hoping to make and who they are making the films for etc. Once they have posed and found answers to these questions, the main body of their filmic aesthetic will be in place. But without these questions and such an aesthetic in place, it is hard to see how any kind of improvements in the video films can ever happen. Quality, unfortunately, has been a major issue for a lot of viewers, and this is even more so for those in the diaspora, who have quite a wide menu of films from other cultures and countries to choose from and compare across. The issue of quality will be discussed shortly as it cuts across the whole of Nollywood activities and is partly responsible for the ambivalence in the reception of African/Nigerian films mentioned at the beginning of the essay.

The name 'Nollywood' is, in the view of this study, symptomatic of a lingering 'colonial mentality' syndrome and the imitative tendency through which it often manifests itself. Major characteristics of colonial mentality are that it is essentially anti-original, uncreative and diffident; colonial mentality attitudes also indicate the presence of residues of 'arrested development', a condition which colonialism sought to permanently place the colonized in. The desire to be like the or as good as the colonizer in everything which was the mode of being and relationships in colonial situations somehow affected some people more than others, and in some it lasts a life time because such people always use the colonial master as the start point and end point of everything, what Albert Memmi (1974) referred to as the colonizer living on in the colonized long after colonization had ended. It is important to point out that in an individual caught in the grip of mental colonization, there is never the desire to be better than the former colonial master; such a person finds it difficult to imagine a world beyond the master. Colonial mentality struck indiscriminately - it did not depend on how educated or uneducated an individual was and today we see affected people in all levels of

a formerly colonized population such as Nigeria. It also did not depend on how wealthy or poor a person was. Moreover, colonial mentality thinking and behaviour was and still is sometimes transmitted across generations, from parents to children and grandchildren.

There is ample evidence of colonial mentality in much of Nollywood, as there is in most other sectors of the Nigerian economy and aspects of life. Manufacturers, for instance, instead of putting their reputations on the line and producing goods to which they can proudly attach their names, would rather have fake labels placed on products which have been locally produced to try and suggest the goods are from abroad. This is seen in products such as alcoholic beverages, textiles, cosmetics. This is also sadly the case with the famous Aba (a major commercial city in Abia State) tailored suits, shirts and trousers which have 'Made in England' labels sewn onto them; the irony in this is that the Aba tailors are in fact very good, and sometimes are even better than their foreign counterparts. The unfortunate outcome of this type of attitude to locally produced goods is that there is no willingness on the part of the makers to take responsibility for the product because that may perchance bring criticism from the consumers if the product is not good, and criticism may lead to shame and or the need for improvement. The manufacturers would rather copy other people's products with the result that there is no incentive to be creative or really good or bad in their own right and taking the credit or blame as the case may be. This attitude is reinforced by that of the consumers who very often are prepared to pay much higher prices for goods because they are or are purported to have been made abroad - where the foreign label is taken to be a guarantee of quality. Africa, Nigeria in particular, is a place where locally produced goods are perceived to be inferior, a people that look down on their own, even local cultures do not escape this negative labelling.

Because the attitudes of both the producers and consumers feed into and reinforce each other, there is almost no thought on the part of the producers about continuity, about learning from mistakes and making improvements. Quality not being of paramount importance, the desire to get rich quick may perhaps be the main reason why so many people are stampeding onto the Nollywood bandwagon - directors, designers and actors without appropriate training and understanding of the art of making, designing or acting in video films. It is understandable that producers or 'marketers' (the financial backers of the video movies) are in the film business to make money, but the artists are the ones responsible for providing the quality and continuity which the industry needs in order to survive over time. But the rate at which Nollywood producers and directors churn out films per week clearly suggests that quality is the furthest from their minds. This reveals a fundamental disrespect for the aesthetic intelligence of the average punter. Video movie fans are different from the average consumers of other locally made goods because the average movie fan knows a good movie when they see one, and added to this, the localised nature of the video movie is its greatest selling point. So, producers are already dealt a

winning hand, but how well they play their hand is up to them. But taking the viewer for granted as some producers are doing by recycling trite formulae and sequels in order to make cheap and quick profit, in the long run, may be a risky game to be playing. It is likely that instead of widening its fan base, Nollywood and the African video movie will see this fan base shrink as many lose interest if the movies continue to offer nothing new, innovative or aesthetically appealing to them any more. The diaspora audience is likely to be the first to switch off, as there are more alternative choices on offer to them from other sources.

But having said all that, one has to acknowledge on the positive side that Nollywood, and in fact African video movies on the whole, continue to be popular and are welcome in a lot of homes in Africa and the African diaspora. Many reasons account for this popularity, but the most significant are the themes, a sense of continental/national pride, the fact of globalisation and the threat of cultural imperialism, a desire for economic freedom and success etc. This essay will now concentrate on the reception of African video movies in the diaspora, and most of the references will be taken from Nollywood and its reception in the United Kingdom where the bulk of this study is based.

Themes in African and Nollywood Movies

Moral themes dominate the video movies. This is hardly surprising given that most African cultures expect their art forms to be functional in some respects. Themes usually are about the moral dilemmas faced by average Africans (Nigerians in this instance) in their daily lives. But generally speaking, a broad range of situations are presented in the movies, ranging from ritual murder in *Living in Bondage* (one of the earliest of the Nollywood movies), destructive sibling rivalry in *Blood Sisters* to cultic practices, violence and political power intrigues in *The Senator*, from betrayal of trust, drug abuse and rehabilitation in *The Rich Also Cry* to witchcraft and 'churchcraft' (in *Only God*, but ever present in most), and from prostitution and HIV/AIDS in *Domitilla*, political and socio-economic god-fatherism, boardroom politics and business and government malpractices to religious bigotry and short-sightedness in *Not Without My Daughter*. It is clear from the list above – which is by no means exhaustive - that the home movies touch on every aspect of life in Africa today, and according to Odia Ofeimun (2004):

> the home videos are brashly, even if self-consciously, seductive. They are turning out the Nigerian society in a no-holds-barred fashion which leaves no room for anybody to hide. . . . Undeniably, they reveal an enormous lot about us and our society that is not beautiful.

These themes, while often explored within situations in which 'tradition' is pitted against 'modernity' and in which characters occasionally seek a way out of moral or other difficulties through outdated cultural practices, are still very much rooted in and reflective of contemporary African realities. Other themes favoured by the movie makers are: corruption and incompetence in those in positions of

authority, marginalisation and maltreatment of women and children, the charlatanism of religious leaders. All in all, the movies confront the audience with truths about how life is lived, and how difficult most find it facing up to the realities of their lives and societies. Thus, some of the criticisms levelled against the movies, Nollywood in particular, such as their excessive portrayal of witchcraft and occultism, violence and ostentatious living can be seen to be unfair since, to a large extent, these truly reflect life in Nigeria and other countries in Africa. Perhaps, this explains their popularity on the continent - when people look at the movies, the characters they see are easily recognisable to them. This is particularly relevant with regards to the equally popular reception which the home videos are receiving among African peoples in the diaspora. Ofeimun (2004) again captures this powerful sense of empathy aroused in African audiences by the movies when he says that:

> Seeing something of your own, close to the skin, is an assurance of life. . . . The truth is that no matter how much we enjoy most liberal Hollywood stuff, we know it is about other people's dreams and realities; it does not necessarily reflect what we are, what we want to be, and how we want to be seen. . . . Until the day when it is possible to be given civilized representation in Hollywood pictures, why be shy about grabbing with all zeal, whatever is able to give our face a camera finish on screen that is a representation of ourselves by ourselves. . . . Besides, it is sometimes better to tell your story even incompetently and badly than for it to be mis-told by others.

The fact that what the movies present are self-representations also add to their truth and relevance for African peoples everywhere.

Popularity of the Home Videos

The immense popularity of the video movies across Africa is replicated in the African diaspora - from Western Europe to Asia and the Far East, from North and South America and the Caribbean to Northern and Eastern Europe and the states of the former Soviet Union, but mainly Russia. And while this widespread popularity in the diaspora can be accounted for by some of the reasons for the popularity in the African continent, there are extra factors that make the movies successful in the diaspora. These include the nostalgic tension and dialectic between home and diaspora; familiarity and empathy with the content of the video films; a sense of the injustice and unfairness of continuing 'orientalist' representations of Africa in Western media; the ever-present threat of the cultural imperialism of Western cultural media, especially cultural production from the United States; the desire to redress the economic imbalance of globalisation through patronage of indigenous industries; and finally, a feeling of ownership of a cultural product which the African video film is. The popularity among the diaspora-born generation, this study found, arises from a desire to learn more about cultural contexts which, in some respects, appear strange and foreign to

them yet in other respects have a familiar resonance because of their vicarious and subliminal identification with these former 'foreign' cultures of their parents.

A major attraction of the video movie for Africans in the diaspora is that, more than any other cultural product and medium of representation, it brings images and associated memories of home into the living rooms of African peoples wherever they find themselves in today's world of huge migrations and population shifts. Diaspora always implies a notion of home, a home which more often than not is more imaginary than real. Those in the diaspora often feel like outsiders looking in on their new cultures, and they also are outsiders to the homeland because the images of home which they carry inside them are of the past of a geographical space that has changed irrevocably since they have been away (see Hall, 200: 233-246). But, it is a home which remains real in the imagination of the diaspora subjects. For those living in the diaspora, memories of home are necessary and are constantly replayed to keep them alive. It is not difficult to see the crucial role which the video movies are performing for diaspora audiences; they provide them with up to date 'images of home' against which to measure life in their new locations of 'exile'.

Responses to the films from across the world include delirious praise, impassioned pleas for more, requests for actors to visit the diaspora, mild criticism and earnest suggestions about how quality can be improved, and severe censor about overuse of witchcraft, magic and evil spells, and excessive violence and criminal acts. A viewer, who is also a writer and critic, talks about the video movie's hypnotic and near addictive quality (at AfTA 2007). In a BBC on-line discussion/opinion poll conducted over a period of months in 2005, responses reflected this polarity in opinion about Nollywood movies. Iyk Akaji Uzoh who lives in Japan, says that 'watching our home movies is something I do a lot because it helps me feel at home', and Kasim Badru from London is 'an Englishman of Nigerian ancestry' who loves 'to watch Nollywood films' as they help him 'to understand my parents' culture and what my life would have been like, had they not moved to England'. But against these are Tunde Odejayi, also from the United Kingdom, who does not watch them and nor does he recommend them, 'because the producers and directors do not have well laid storylines. They tend to glorify the social decadence in the upper class in Nigeria', and Anthony Okosun from Baltimore, USA who sees Nigerian video movies as 'over glorified amateur drama sessions poorly captured in celluloid'. He finds them as 'lacking in technical depth' and 'the sound and picture qualities are of less than average quality'. But Bernard from Kent, United Kingdom captures the views of many viewers in the diaspora when he says:

> I regularly watch Nigerian video films because they are very good as it brings the African lifestyle to memory. It helps to educate some African children born outside Africa about their origin. My children watch some of the films under my guidance. It also helps to educate foreigners about the lifestyle in Nigeria and Africa without bias, presenting it as it is.
> http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4524458.stm

And for many, the video movies perform the twin functions of entertainment and education.

Their portability - they are in VHS format, DVDs and VCDs - enables them to travel very easily from their production locations in Africa to many parts of the world. Before video shops began selling the video movies, friends and relatives visiting from home or sometimes mailing them through the post were the means of making the films available to avid viewers in the diaspora. The video shops which specialise in African films have grown in the United Kingdom, especially in London where even hair salons, food stores, corner shops and barbers' shops have become vendors. Zenithfilms are now planning to launch a 24-hour a day Nollywood movie channel on Sky Digital scheduled to start broadcasting in January 2007. There are now two channels – SKY 331 Nollywood and SKY 333 AIT Movistar which began broadcasting in January and February 2008 respectively – dedicated to African video movies. All these outlets make the acquisition and sharing of the movies between family and friends quite easy.

Although many critics of the video movie genre question the wisdom and appropriateness of the content of some of the films, they can not deny that there is an element of truth in their depictions of life in Africa. One only has to look at movies such as *The Rich Also Cry*, with its slightly implausible tale of a young girl who gets pregnant after having been drugged by her school matron and her accomplice. The poor girl is sent packing to the village by her sanctimonious parents after her stubborn refusal to have an abortion because it was against her Christian beliefs. Her grandmother's melodramatic callousness and her grandfather's spineless inability to protect her from her grandmother's maltreatment are all so farfetched to be believable. Yet, the main thrust of the story which centres on abuse of privilege and trust, incompetent parenting, Christian hypocrisy on her parents' part, drug peddling and abuse, notions of retributive justice and oracular knowledge, and the sharp contrast between the opulence of life in the city for some and the abjectness for most in the villages, all are facts of life and real issues which people face in Africa today. What the movies do very well, therefore, is to create a unique kind of realism, one that flirts very comfortably with the fantastic and the magical. The video movie proclaims itself to be art - a reconfiguration and transmutation of life through the prism of art. This style is also reflected quite a lot in the acting, which in the main is stagy and theatrical, but which some critics and viewers perceive as 'shouting' or 'overacting'. But John McCall is right when he points out that the video dramas:

> With their characters torn between tradition and modernity, capture the hopes and fears of today's Africans in unprecedented ways . . . . "Nigerian filmmakers have been able to touch a sort of sensibility of the people - their life, their aspirations, their family values, their worldview, their cosmology, spiritual and other wise. . ." (2004: 109)

The fact that the events, situations and characters in the dramas inform and keep diaspora Africans aware of what is happening back home makes the video movies very popular. That production keeps pace with life, a negative fact in

some respects since it accentuates the profit drive and the fact of everybody jumping in to make a movie as quickly as is humanly possible and make money in the shortest time, ironically makes the movies quite topical in their themes. The movies deal with real people in everyday situations, with all aspects of the lives of Africans in cities, towns and villages covered - from the opulent surroundings and overtly ambitious characters in films such as *The Senator*, *My Best Friend*, *The Rich Also Cry* to the abjectness of *Bad Meat*, *Ikuku*, *Only God*, *I Hate My Village*, and *Fake Doctor*. What unites all of them is that even when the characters and situations have been exaggerated, most African viewers are still able to recognise and empathise with the characters as they seek ways out of their moral dilemmas and social predicaments. Although some diaspora Africans have lived away from the continent for many years, cultural habits die hard and whether it is belief in 'witchcraft', in magic and supernatural powers, or in the consequences of infringing on cultural taboos, seeing these images in the movies strike chords of recognition in the viewers since these beliefs and practices have in some cases traveled across with the Africans. Some may see these depictions as shameful and a reversion to backwardness in a post-modern technological age, but the truth is that some people, whether in Africa or in the diaspora, still order and live their lives influenced by such beliefs. Recent cases of child abductions and human sacrifice - the case of the torso in the Thames which was eventually traced to Nigeria - are uncomfortable reminders of how close to home these images from the movies hit. Critics of these images argue that such movies do not present Africa in a positive light, that they reinforce the distorted and denigrating images of Africa peddled by Western media. But one can only say to these critics that it is better and more bearable that this representation comes from within than from outside.

For much of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, most of Africa was under European colonial rule. Part of the colonial weapon and technique of subjugation involved what Edward Said (1978) calls 'orientalist' forms of knowledge and representation of the colonised 'other'. All through the colonial period and post-independence times, instruments of representation were and have remained firmly under the control of the imperial centre. This means that all the classical tropes of savagery, barbarity, inferiority and infantilism invented and used to define and describe the colonised, have only slightly altered in today's world. To most in the West, Africa is still the Dark Continent of Hegel, Karl Marx and Joseph Conrad in his classic novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1902, 1986), a land and a people completely before civilization and outside of history. Surprisingly, media images of Africa up to and even now has been only of natural disasters, famine, disease, poverty, internecine wars with devastated villages and pillaged towns; and images of modern African cities are of chaotic roads where there are no traffic laws to regulate the conduct of drivers and other users of the road. African politics is presented as confused, inept and corrupt – witness the recent interest and reporting of the Zimbabwe elections and Robert Mugabe's characteristic refusal to accept defeat. African countries are presented as unstable

and thus unsafe environments to invest in. In fact, Africa is where nothing works, and life is lived at the outskirts of modernity.

Granted that some of these images may have elements of truth in them in some instances, but there is also the other Africa of the rich, of good houses, roads and order - the government reservation areas (GRAs) comparable to other wealthy middles class suburbs in the West or anywhere else in the world. This successful Africa, for curious reasons, however, does not interest the Western 'orientalist' media since showing such images will call to question the notion of Western superiority still prevalent in the world today. Not surprisingly, this Africa features quite prominently in Nollywood and other African video movies - there are a lot of well-dressed and healthy looking Africans living in palatial mansions, driving expensive and fashionable state of the art cars, and discussing or pursuing their mega-business ambitions and deals in push hotel lounges or restaurants. But alongside these are also representations of city, town and village life - which are often poor and deprived, in stark contrast to the ostentatious affluence of the other side. It is to the credit of the video movies, and one suspects that because the movies are addressed first and foremost to Africans, that they do not offer the other image of the romanticized African villages of noble savages (a recent version of which was presented in Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America* in which African kings, princes and courtiers wore tail-coats and ties! The ladies wore a cross between African traditional designs and Western ball-room gowns). What viewers get from the video films is rather a balanced picture of life in African cities, towns and villages; life as it is lived by the different segments of African societies. Such a panoramic concatenation of images enables the video movies to explore recurring themes of characters that rise above adversity - sometimes through hard (honest and sometimes not too honest) work, and sometimes through recourse to traditional magic or prayer to indigenous gods, the Christian God or Muslim Allah. The moral dilemmas, always present in the films, also endear them to the diaspora audience, who occasionally are bewildered when faced by what appears to be an absence of a clear moral framework to guide life in their new places of abode. Besides, they are also confronted daily on television with cultural productions such as the banal and often morally questionable soaps (*Eastenders*, *Coronation Street*, *Brookside*, *Neighbours*, *Hollyoaks* etc.) and a host of Hollywood blockbusters which create ambivalent moral universes for their characters to live in. The certainty of a moral standpoint, occasionally strident and conservative, found in the African video films reassures the audiences and reinstates the role of the artists as moral conscience and outspoken voices of their societies. It is often normal to have people, after watching a video movie, enter into heated debates about events and the choices characters have made and the consequences of such decisions.

Many Africans in the diaspora feel that for the first time Africa has found an answer to a long established Western, especially North American, domination of instruments of cultural production and dissemination. Although not at the same level yet, but African video movies, especially Nollywood, are seriously challenging and beginning to displace Hollywood and Western films in African

homes of the masses, both in Africa and the diaspora. It is now not unusual to come into African homes in the United Kingdom and other parts of the diaspora and see stacks of Nollywood titles and just a few Hollywood's recent blockbusters. The ratio - in the last three or four years - is on average 4:1 in favour of African video movies. For many in the diaspora, and not just Africans, but also other peoples such as Caribbean peoples of African descent , African-Americans and Black British, Nollywood (because it is the dominant African video movie industry) signals the emergence of an African/Black cultural and economic institution to effectively challenge the cultural imperialism of Western Europe and the United States of America. For so long, Nigeria had disappointed the aspirations and expectations of black and African peoples around the world that it was going to provide the leadership needed to usher in the emergence of an African and Black political and cultural presence and force in the world. Nollywood seems to have satisfied two of these expectations - the cultural, and hopefully, its popularity across a broad range of audiences - Nigerians, Haitians, Malians, Ugandans, Senegalese, Zambians, Angolans, Congolese, Barbadians Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Martiniquains and St Lucians - will ensure its economic success. Already Nollywood is acknowledged as the third largest film industry in the world, behind Bollywood and Hollywood. Television channels such as AIT, BEN, OBE and Passion TV - the last devotes Sunday afternoons to Nollywood - and the two mentioned previously show Nollywood and African video films regularly. With all these providing outlets for African movies, their audience base can only grow. Even the BBC has broadcast documentaries on Nollywood in the last three years. In a sense therefore, African video movies, without becoming mainstream in the West and North America, are no longer the curios or very late night marginalia which 'well-made' African films used to be treated as on BBC 2 and Channel 4 in the late eighties and early nineties in the United Kingdom.

The problem of piracy notwithstanding, the African video movie industry has signalled an economic renaissance for Africa, especially Nigeria, because of the export potential which it represents for the producers, given the increased population in the last twenty years or so of African diaspora communities around the world. The World Bank estimates that up to seven million Nigerians alone live abroad at the present time, and when other countries' figures are added to this, the diaspora represents a very important market for the African video movie industry. Those who love the video movies - and a majority do - are quite happy to pay the comparatively cheap prices at which the films retail in the West. In the United Kingdom, for instance, a VHS version of a film sells for £4-5 compared to the £11.99 for British, European and Hollywood films; DVDs/VCDs sell at £10 for 3, while Western equivalents sell for between £5 and £13.99, depending on when a particular movie was released. The Nollywood Movies channel charges a monthly subscription of £5.99. For those diaspora Africans who buy the African video movies, there is a feeling of pleasure that they are contributing to the development and sustenance of a bourgeoning indigenous cultural industry whose economic success will get translated into better lives for those who are involved in the industry and their relatives. Nollywood, it has been shown,

provides employment for thousands of people in Nigeria alone - actors, directors marketers, producers, scriptwriters, dramatists, technicians and other ancillary personnel. It also exports jobs and capital to other African countries such as Uganda, Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania, Sierra Leone and the Congo, where Nigerian marketers and directors have made films in. This, in the long run, can only be good in countries and economies where neither the governments nor the financial, manufacturing and the service sectors have proved able to provide sustainable employment for a great many people. Thus the African video movie industry, Nollywood in particular, is in its own way redressing the economic and cultural imbalance of globalisation, which up till now had meant the developed Western economies controlling the flow and deployment of capital and products between the different countries and parts of the world. In the pre-video movie operation of globalisation, the underdeveloped economies were expected to remain eternal consumers and their countries the dumping grounds of both wanted and unwanted goods from the developed countries. Nollywood has constituted itself, through its merited popularity, into a continental and global brand and exporter of a cultural product which the West at the moment does not control. It is mainly Africans in the diaspora who buy and sell the video films, and Western governments and cultural powers are yet to find a way to muscle in on the act.

Video Movies and Diaspora Africans

Identifying with the content of the videos, or feeling for the first time that they are watching African stories being told by Africans, makes diaspora Africans feel empathy for and a sense of ownership of the video movies. They also feel like vicarious shareholders in the African home video industry, and so its success represents their success. Even those Africans who feel slightly embarrassed by its brazenness, poor sound quality, very theatrical and 'loud' acting, occasional trite plots, also grudgingly respect the video industry for its audacity in launching itself, going forward, making mistakes but reluctantly, it must be pointed out, learning its art and business along the way – and a lot of the later films are increasingly becoming more technically accomplished and even more subtle in content. The actors, in fact, are beginning to show an awareness and familiarity with the medium and are gradually starting to perform in a manner appropriate to the medium. Because of its mass appeal across the range of generations of African peoples in the diaspora, and provided the path to improved quality is kept to, the African video movie indeed has a bright future, and it will only be a matter of time before it effectively stands on an equal footing with other film industries in the cultural market places outside Africa, including Hollywood.

Types of Audience

Random interviews conducted over a six week period in the summer of 2004 in Lagos and Zaria supports the view which is still strongly circulating among

scholars and movie-makers of Nollywood that there is a class character and distinction in the viewing audience of African video movies in Nigeria. This viewpoint suggests that the upper /middle classes are not particularly keen on the movies, whereas the masses and lower middle class can't seem to get enough of them. This distinction seems not to apply to the audience in the diaspora. This may well be because notions and boundaries of class are rather blurred and difficult to define or maintain in the diaspora setting. A kind of leveling out happens in the diaspora and often is able to wipe away such distinctions and tastes in and between people. The only viewing preference which this study found in the United Kingdom (London in particular) was in relation to preferences for indigenous language movies such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, Fanti, Wolof or Bambara. In these instances, language, more than anything else, plays a major role in determining what people choose to buy and watch. Generally speaking though, the English and French movies and the indigenous language ones with English or French dubbings or subtitles appeal across ethnic and language boundaries.

As in Africa, the appeal of African video movie cuts across generations of Africans and peoples of African descent in the diaspora and so, it is often a shared family viewing. There however is a significant difference. In addition to being a social activity, shared viewing is the practice in Africa because there may not be many television sets and video/dvd/vcd players around, so people - nuclear family members or the extended family, and sometimes neighbours - congregate in homes which have to watch movies. In the United Kingdom, for instance, even in nuclear households where you have television sets and video or dvd players in every room, family members still come together to watch the films. Hardly any one watches on their own except if the person lives alone, but even then, most would visit relatives or friends to share the experience with them. The emotional identification with the content of the movies prompts this desire to share - it is almost like watching a national team at major international sporting events; it is not something anyone does on their own, if they can help it. One major characteristic of such group watching is that it always leads to discussions during or after the film has ended.

The viewing African audience in the diaspora can be divided into two major generational groups: the first generation, made up of direct immigrants from Africa, and the second generation, comprising those born in the diaspora. There is a third amorphous group of audience for the video movie. This group is made up of peoples of African descent who are either from the Caribbean, South America, Canada and African-Americans. Added to these are blacks of Asian descent, some having ended up in the diaspora via Africa or the Caribbean. Then there are white Europeans, Americans or Canadians who for one reason or another are interested in Africa, her cultures and peoples. In other parts of the world, others become interested in the video movies because of their associations with the diaspora Africans in their midst. This study however concentrated more on the bi-generational African audience in the diaspora. This audience of two parts is markedly different from the one in Africa in some respects. While the two may

share watching and apparently have a common enjoyment, appreciation and critical dissection of the video movies, their reasons for watching are quite different.

For the first generation, their attachment and appreciation arises from a feeling of seeing what they completely identify with. What they see on the screen is life that they are very familiar with, images that graphically remind them of the home they've left but which strongly reinforces the diasporic nature of their current existence. It is in the first generation that the tension of diaspora and home is played out the most. As the makers of Nollywood and other video movies claim, what they are telling are African stories from African perspectives. In a way, for this generation of Africans in the diaspora these movies are engaged in a surreptitious postcolonial counter-discourse which resonates very strongly with them as they must have experienced the mis-representations of Africa by the colonial and neo-colonial Western cultural media. In effect, these video movies are presenting alternative images of Africa to Africans and to the rest of the world. Postcoloniality is about giving space, voice and visibility to the formerly silenced and invisible colonized. It is also about assuming a subject position in a context of cultural representation, and this is precisely what the African video movie is doing.

And in another respect, the first generation, while recognizing and identifying with these images are sometimes appalled by the 'brazen incompetence or brash lowness of some of the pictures (Ofeimun, 2004), by the often mad speed and chaos of life in African cities, and sometimes by the poverty and abjectness of the countryside where life is presented as still being lived by a majority at a basic level. These images occasionally alienate the first generation through reinforcing for them their sense and position of exile, the homes they have left behind and which they may never return to. They capture in graphic detail that inexplicable tension and contradiction between home and diaspora. Home, according to Hall (1996: 114-9), is that place where the diasporic self is escaping from, a place where he/she is not. Yet he or she needs and hangs on to memories of it to help make sense of diaspora. The diasporic film viewer thus needs the video images to remind them and help them make sense of their present locations of exile.

But for their children, on the other hand, the films are veritable visual libraries of their parents' originary cultures and homes. The first generation's mediated practices of their respective African cultures help the children and the young diaspora 'Africans' to engage with and understand the 'real thing'. For most, having been fed on a diet of Disney, Hollywood and the ever present soaps, the African video movies represent their first and direct encounter with 'the way of life' of their parents' original homes. The avidity and intensity with which the younger generations of diaspora Africans watch and enjoy these video movies is sometimes amazing. My experience with my 14 and 12 year olds is typical of responses in other households that I spoke to. My children enjoy the movies and ask that more of them be bought. They now know the actors and are always eager to discuss the stories after watching each film. While the African video films have

not completely displaced Disney, Hollywood and other Western films in the home, they are the ones that offer the family a sense of occasion, something that the whole family look forward to and share together. I am often amazed at the level of their curiousity and engagement, and their willingness to penetrate and take the world of traditional medicine, oracles, magic and witchcraft in their stride, while retaining the basic thread of the stories being told. I have never discussed in as much detail with them any of their Disney and Hollywood favourites, such as *The Lion King, Pocahontas, Aladin, Toy Story, Aristocrats, The Jungle Book, Snow White, Mulan, Beauty and the Beast,* and *Cinderella,* which have been watched over and over again in the house. Thus, for all their reputed failings, it is to the credit of the African video movies that there is something in them for everyone.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has revealed that the presence of the African video movie in the diaspora has grown and grown in the last five years or so. There are now many outlets, especially through the informal economy of the hair salons and barbers' shops, the occasional dubious street hawkers and vendors. Videos can also be got from local African and Asian corner shops, video rental shops and on-line distribution networks, as well as the 24-hour satellite channels. What this suggests is that there is a growing awareness of and demand for them. Non-cable television subscriber friends living in other parts of the United Kingdom travel to London to look for movies, or sometimes they ask for some to be bought and posted to them. Families also exchange as it often very hard to keep up with the speed of new releases. But that is not to say that all Africans in the diaspora love watching the movies. One fact which became clear in the course of the study was that the pattern of watching African video movies, to a large extent, depends on or reflects the attitudes of diasporic Africans to their respective African cultures *vis-a-vis* the cultures of their respective diaspora contexts. It is more likely to be that African video films are watched in homes where parents are still proud and in touch with their 'home' cultures. While in other homes where parents strive to distance themselves from African cultural values, the video film is perceived as a threat to the new cultural regime and outlook which these parents are hoping to foster in their children, and as such the movies are not likely to be encouraged in such homes. Some in the African diaspora who I interviewed in the United Kingdom were very dismissive of the African video movies, and would not be seen dead watching or being associated in any way with them. Interestingly, none of these people ever gave any concrete reason for not being 'particularly fond' of the movies. Reasons given ranged from 'they are badly made', 'they are too violent', 'there is too much witchcraft and evil people in them' to a lady at a shop in Peckham, South East London, who felt 'embarrassed' about the content of the movies which to her were 'very primitive' and reflected badly on Africa. For these reasons, she was never going to allow her children to watch them.

But those who support the video movies also acknowledge some of these failings, and while most watched and allowed their families to watch too because they felt that the films were not telling lies, some argue that the only way to make the films better is by encouraging the directors, actors and producers through continued foreign patronage. Most art forms define but are ultimately shaped by their audiences. A highly critical but supportive audience is what the African video movie industry needs, and there is already a sizeable one in the diaspora. This is supported by the existence now of a magazine, *Nigerian Videos*, dedicated to Nollywood video movies in the United Kingdom.

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