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African Cinema(s) and Theorizations: Arts, Scholarship & Debates

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Abstract
Much as the beginning of African cinema is about decolonization, one way of approaching its current structure and operations is by investigating the complex web of its new postcolonial realities. If its past can be said to ideologically focus on counteracting stereotypical (mis)presentations of Africa, its present-day scenario is witnessing a hybrid of cinematic practices, digitally engineered to speak about the continent in varied tongues: politically, nationally, commercially and otherwise. The thrust of this article is exploring different trends that have characterized the cinema(s) of Africa in past and present times in terms of artistry, scholarship and theorizations. It uses the historical analytical method to explore how old nationalist celluloid-based film industries seem to have now yielded way to a digitally revolutionized system, bringing about an avalanche of new ancillary film industries after the Nigerian Nollywood model. Thus, it argues that to the extent that cinemas across Africa have become digital and filmless presently, scholarly theorizations and debates around their praxis ought also to change in order to account for nuances shrouding their representations.

Keywords: Africa cinema(s), Art, Debates, Scholarship, Theory

1. Introduction
Although the continent of Africa was involved in filmmaking as soon as the medium was discovered (Cameron, 1994: 1), it took some time before African filmmakers started telling their own stories with the film medium. Foremostly the West championed the art and arguably represented Africa in stereotypical fashions. Most of the earliest films about Africa are texts "where blacks are usually mysterious figures in the background" (Cousins, 2004: 369) and for Ukadike (2013: 100), they depict where "Africa was relegated to the background, serving but as exotic décor for the fiction and documentary films…" Significantly, Diawara (1992: 1) rehearses the history of how western colonialists, missionaries and anthropologists used the medium of cinema as a civilizing tool on Africa as soon as it was discovered thereby pointing to uses made of the artform beyond the stereotypical misrepresentations of the colonial times. It was not until the 1960s and -1970s that African cinema started speaking for Africans. Here, Ukadike (2013: 5) argues that the cinema medium was appropriated for cultural re-engineering by Africans at this stage to reconstruct their identity image. According to the author:

> As independence paved the way for the acquisition of cinematic know-how and filmmaking infrastructure, it is understandable how, in the pioneering period of the 1960s -- 1970s, it became the concern of African cinema practitioners to link the emerging cinema with politics and education and to stress African histories and culture which Euro-American cinemas often caricature.

The post-independence period of African cinema (distinguishing it from the colonial era), therefore, is the era of decolonization efforts by African filmmakers. Ideologically speaking, it is the age of shooting-back at the West, when most cineastes started constructing narratives that focus on the humanity of Africans as against the earlier stereotypical misrepresentations of their identity. It is also the historical epoch that witnessed the formation of FEPACI, the pan-African association of filmmakers in Algiers in 1969. Commenting on the nature of film in Africa at this stage, Barlet (2000: 143) states that the "films of black Africa deliberately mingle the esoteric and the sociological gazes…. They take the form of gestures, attitudes, rhythms, colours, and so on, combining with the words – or even with proverbs. This means that African films made in this era are not only traditional but also were imbued with advocacy for nationalism. As Childs and Williams (1997: 4) argue, the main ideology of the films is in the opposition they make to the hegemony of colonialist cultures Thus, film form at this time was utterly shaped to be political and oppositional against western ethnocentrisms.

The 1980s and 1990s films did not continue with the ideology of the earlier films. Being technologically activated because of availability of sophisticated digital cameras and editing software, video-films tended towards showcasing scintillating spectacles for commercial purposes. They became entertainment-driven and with the use of visual effects

enabled by computer-generated images (CGI) and acoustics, a new model that is quick to produce began to emerge. This was led by Nollywood, the popular film industry in Nigeria with the release of *Living in Bondage* in 1992, a narrative with scenes of apparitions and spectacles of wealth and glamour. Following Nollywood's model are other ancillary film industries across Africa, such as: Ghallywood (Ghana), Jozywood (South Africa), Bongowood (Tanzania), Riverwood (Kenya), Kannywood (Northern Nigeria) and Ugawood (Uganda). Dennis (2022) adds to the list of these sub-national cinemas the video-films of the Kumasi region in Ghana popularly known as Kumawood and there may be more others in this model elsewhere across the continent outside of those mentioned already.

In the light of differences shrouding mainstream and new cinemas of Africa, scholars like Haynes (2011), Krings and Okome (2013) agree that Africa today has two opposing filmmaking cultures. Speaking on disparities around them, Krings and Okome (2013: 22) cast their differences in binary oppositions: high-low, elite-popular, art-business, political-entertaining, progressive-retrogressive, celluloid-video. In other words, the two are worlds-apart in artform and even though Africa constitutes their subject matter, they approach it from divergent perspectives. The table below helps unpack the narrative techniques and ideologies underlying the two film cultures which problematize the conceptualization of the subject matter: African cinema – what is it in the light of all these differences and nuances?

Table 1: Differences in African cinemascape: old and new

Mainstream African Cinema	Contemporary African Cinemas
Ideology	
● Decolonization	● · Entertainment
● Politicized	● · Commercialized
● Educational Values	● · Popular Interest
Production	
● Use of 35mm/16mm cameras & films	● · Use of digital cameras & technologies
● Linear Editing	● · Non-Linear Editing
● Theatrical releases through mainstream distribution channels	● · Combination of theatrical/TV/online distributions channels
● Systematized	● · Demystified
Artistry	
● · Auteurial	● · Popular Culture
● · Orature	● · Hybridized

Source: Authors

2. Literature review

In this section, it is instructive to foremostly look at the concept of African cinema and state how it is arguably wrong to be classifying all cinemas of Africa in the singular. Thus, with multiple filmmaking models across the continent, it is appropriate to acknowledge that there is a problem of nomenclature in addressing African cinema(s) in the light of their individuality and independence as national cinemas of different nations. Among the issues people raise are: Should

African cinema be discussed in the singular or in plural and what is 'African' in African cinema? This is what is being addressed in this part of the study.

2.1. Conceptualizing African Cinema(s)

Whereas originally film in Africa was conceptualized under the rubric of African cinema, scholars today think it a misnomer to continue to brand the entire cinemas of Africa in the singular. This is because Africa as a continent is varied not only in terms of linguistic and cultural differences but also in its representational modes. Barlet (2000: viii), in particular, faults the designation of African cinema in the singular by arguing that "Africa is plural and so is its cinemas". Corroborating him are scholars like Tcheuyap (2011) and Garritano (2013) who identify the huge impact of modern technology on film industries across the continent and call for more theorizations. Ukadike (2013: 4) shares the same impression with this school and recommends catching up with speed in terms of diversity of cultures around the filmmaking phenomenon across Africa presently. According to the author:

> Over the years African cinema has undergone a radical transformation by widening its scope and offering an expanded definition of a continent's cinemas as work which expresses the diversity and plurality of the cultures of the producing nations. Indeed, the term 'African cinema' may be seen as outdated, now used only for convenience.

No matter how insignificant the issue of what constitutes African cinema is in terms its make-up, it is another variable that pops up in debates regarding the subject-matter besides the nomenclature. This is because most people wonder at what to look out for in categorizing African films: is it the director or thematic thrust, the context of production or the setting of the narrative? Generally, this kind of polemics seems to be premised on Diawara's (1988: 6) view that filmmakers of African origin ought to be making authentic African films "to avoid making African cinema into an imperfect appendix to European cinema". But responding to this, Murphy (2000: 241) contests the notion of authentic African cinema and concludes that there is nothing like authentic African or western cinema. Both Diawara and Murphy's position may appear to contradict each other but both have their merits. Whereas to Murphy, African films cannot wholly be authentic since the technologies used in making them can hardly be said to be African and films most thrive on universalist principles, the point that Diawara makes is not on tools and technologies but on using large doses of African cultural artifacts, costumes, rituals and values to give films uniquely distinguished form that relays Africa's aesthetics and cosmovision.

Conceptualizing African cinema has attracted many voices to the debate. Scholars like Shaka (2004: 28) believe that "for a film to qualify as an African film, its primary audience must be African, and this must be inscribed in the very conception and textual positioning of the broad range of African subjects, identities, and social experiences, and its director must be African." This, no doubt, corroborates Diawara (1992: I) who is of the view that African cinema can adequately be conceptualized only when it is "one produced, directed, photographed, and edited by Africans and starring Africans who spoke in African languages". This emancipatory posture, therefore, conceives African film as that which is engrained with nationalistic elements while projecting unity of purpose across all of Africa. Akudinobi (2001: 124 - 125) on this parlance defines the spirit of nationalism in cinemas of Africa by arguing as follows:

> African nationalism is a synthesis of various intellectual histories, protest traditions, specific cultural institutions, and unique lived experiences …to the extent that African directors show marked concern for the regeneration of African cultural heritage, the incorporation of indigenous legends, aesthetics, and philosophical precepts in their works, most African films fall under the rubrics of cultural nationalism.

What this means is that nationalism refers to both ideology behind the artistic production of African films and the mission of cultural affirmations expressed in portraying Africa as a unique set of people. As outlined by Tomaselli, Shepperson and Eke (1995: 25), such a film "offers resistance to imperialism, to oppression. As a cinema of emancipation, it articulates the codes of an essentially First World technology into indigenous aesthetics and mythologies." Thus, to the extent that mainstream African cinemas are nationalistic, they are considered African cinemas in shape and content. Arguably, the form is now changing with the advent of new digital films. Scholars like Tcheuyap (2013) because of the digital impact on films across Africa recommend re-examining texts to discover their variants and distinguishing nuances. He definitely can be said to align with Murphy (2000: 247) who argues that rather than see differences between the way films of African and Western origins are handled, it is better that the framework of post-colonial theory is used in accounting for divergent cinematic views in "those countries that were formerly colonies of Western imperial powers".

Commenting on the contributions of Tcheuyap to film scholarship in Africa, Ingle (2012: 313), argues that his usage of the term 'post-nationalist' to address films of the 1960s–1980s signals the fact that the first generation of film critics in the continent focused on some overtly political concerns while neglecting the more entertaining elements like comedy and sex. But no matter how this set of scholars are being criticized, they must be valorized as well for keeping film scholarship alive while difficulties shrouded the industry in all ramifications. The truth that has to be said is that both in its past and present, establishing an acceptable theoretical framework for studying African cinematic expressions outside of western canons has been a herculean task. As much as nationalism tallies with the Third Cinema theory, propagated by Solanas and Getino (1983) of Latin American origin in the 1960s, it may not account for both the old and new cinematic experiences of Africa expediently and exponentially.

3. Research method

This study is one that applies the historical analytical method to exploring the nature of the old nationalist celluloid-based film industries of Africa and those of the digital era presently. In other words, the methodology is basically qualitative in approach and relies heavily on library research and screening of films of both eras privately to gather data used in the overall analysis of cinematic arts in Africa. The data at the end is presented in descriptive model, meaning that both the old and new film forms are thoroughly compared in terms of their ideology and aesthetics in an effort to showcase developmental patterns and progress across the continent generally. This kind of research design is used to argue pointedly for the position of this paper that the nomenclature of cinemas from across Africa be considered in their multinational and multidimensional layers and no longer as a single unit of an enterprise belonging to the whole of Africa as if it is a village.

4. Analysis of African Cinemas: Characterizing the Old

By means of rigorous investigations, this study identifies some unique characteristics underlying African cinema. This, at first sight, appears to define the texts homogenously but also observes significant specific contributions of different texts to the subject matter of debate regarding its nomenclature. The findings arrived at upon screening of films for this study can be summarized as follows:

4.1. Ideology as Decolonization of Culture

Since African cinema of the old is foregrounded on Third cinema ideology, its texts are usually interpreted in opposition to Western stereotypical representations. Authors like Ukadike (1994), Diawara (1992), Mbye (1998), Mbye and Cham (1998), Magombe (1997), Akudinobi (2001), Barlet (2000), Bakari (2007) and Shaka (2004) discuss the films of mainstream African cinema as utterly nationalistic and saddled with decolonization engagements. Ukadike (2013: 56) summarizes not only the impression these scholars have of the films of the era but also what he perceives as the thrust of the films. The researcher argues that "…the objective of the proponents of a distinctly African cinema has been to 'decolonize culture', to put it rightfully in the hands of the people, and use it to indict the oppressors and stimulate radical discourse for genuine change". This view is shared by Barlet (2000: 27) who also says that, "the goal was to create a new aesthetics: semi documentaries denouncing colonialism where it still existed, and fictions to combat the economic and cultural alienation of the independent countries in respect of the West". Next to this ideological characterization of the films is the implicit reliance of storylines on the oral culture of Africans.

4.2. Narrative Pattern: Use of Orality to Depict Africanness

One of the major elements that scholarship has identified as recurrent in most films of African origin is the fact that they are imbued with cultural aesthetics. Here, the interplay of thematic leitmotifs such as folklores, mythologies, rituals, festivals and costumes point to orality in African cinema. Even when filmmakers deal with tension between tradition and modernity, these elements are made to speak to hybridity in African culture in such a way that storylines are made fluid with people's everydayness and enhanced to convey cultural meanings. Ukadike (2013: 6), on this note, states that "[A]though African filmmakers invoke oral tradition as a primary influence, they have appropriated it and applied it in various ways to create paradigms for addressing the broad range of social, political, cultural, and historical issues of Africa". One of the ways this is done is by modeling narratives on Africa's cosmovision. The influence of culture on African cinema therefore, can be equated with the vertebral column of beingness of the narratives. This is said because culture and its artifacts are the sources of inspiration for the films.

4.3. Transcendentalism in Spatiotemporality: The Cosmovision of Africa

Similar to nationalist tendencies operative in African cinema is the cultural philosophy of communalism. This is a mindset that promotes unity-in-diversity among Africans while recognizing some form of interactivity between the physical world and the supramundane other, which the ancestors and deities occupy. It is the view that everything is symbolic and interrelated. Films capture this impression in shots and sequences in a way that makes Teshome (1989: 61) describe its realization in films of African origin as 'emancipatory aesthetics'. He highlights this by arguing that "the open-ended nature of the films, which accounts for the consideration of everyday life helps to compose its aesthetic, wherein, the memorability of work has much to do with both the intellectual stimulation of one as well as his or her sense of what is emancipatory aesthetics". In other words, when the camera moves slowly in films, capturing details of both space and movements, it is in an effort of depicting life-in-community and actions around it. Validating this impression, Barlet (2000: 173) further argues that in African cinema,

> The camera embraces landscapes and bodies, setting them in both their geographical and political environments. The African space, which is often filmed in panoramic long shots, is indissoluble from passing time. Thus, still, shots of landscapes, sunsets, or people standing still have nothing static about them. They represent time – the time of the narrative or the time the narrative subtends, a vision of the world registered in movement.

In all of these issues, mainstream African cinema is foregrounded as being uniquely different in approach and visual composition in order to address the identity construction and everydayness of Africans. To the extent this has changed

tremendously due to the impact of digital technologies on cinema production and consumption processes across Africa, this study examines the nature of new cinematics across Africa presently.

5. New Cinemas of Africa: Digital Revolution in Film Arts

Arguably the digital revolution that hit the filmmaking process since the 1990s can be said to have democratized everything about film and empowered many nations to experiment with new technologies. This is how it feels across Africa unlike the way it was in the 1970s and 1980s. From production to distribution, and from exhibition to consumption, the cinemas of Africa presently can no longer be said to follow a common thread or fight for a united course, such as the decolonization project of the post-independence epoch.

Originally people felt videos were a mockery of cinema and did not know how to treat them. The organizers of big film festivals like FESPACO even discriminated against video-films, considering the model as a passing phase in the history of cinema. Unabashedly one of its organizing executives in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) expresses this position by telling the media: "Our festival is for films; that means you have to bring films on 35mm but Nollywood usually makes films on video tape" (Umaru, 2007). In other words, the Nollywood model then being a video-film format did not qualify to be included as part of cinematic arts since its films were outside the parameters of celluloid films. This, to a great extent, is now revised and while the digital model seems to be in vogue, the celluloid based brand is gradually being phased away. Speaking on this, Labouba (2012: 8) confirms that the video technology has "met tremendous success not only in Nigeria, but also in most of black Africa, and throughout the Africa in Diaspora". Thus, based on the foregoing, the case is made that digitization has become the mainstay of cinema to the extent of creating filmless movies. Rethinking digital technology as a new status symbol in Africa, many filmmakers have now expressed their art with it. Haynes (2014: 54) stresses this by stating that "new technologies have created new competition for sales and eroded markets". It has democratized and demystified film production globally and particularly in Africa. It becomes instructive to acknowledge with Labouba that FESPACO is now forced to change its policy in respect of the circuits of entries for participation at the film festival. As argued by him, FESPACO is:

> …now divided into two separate sections according to formats: the main competition and the TV/Video competition. While the main competition awards around 15 prizes for feature films (including even an award for best poster) and 3 for short films, the video section is a 'catchall' competition with no distinction between shorts and features. Only two prizes (jury prize and best film) are dedicated for works of fiction submitted on video format (Betacam, DVCAM, DVD, and many more.), regardless of length and quality (2012: 12).

No matter how people look at African cinema space therefore, it is right to state that the video-film model is all about the uniqueness of its consumers whose stories the films reconstruct and such narratives have taken the centre-stage. Thus, the digital video-films as a significant aspect of the cinema making culture of Africans presently does not only imply availability of film technology to local people but also a remark on the fluidity of representations in present day circumstances. Some key characteristics of the impact of digital technologies on the new cinemas of Africa therefore can be summarized as follows:

- Films are produced with multiple ideologies in successive fashions
- Most are melodramatic in nature to attract audiences for pecuniary reasons
- They are more liberalized in terms of welcoming outside co-productions and sub-genre formations.

The video-films have some valuable significance for Africans because of the way they address their concerns. They, according to Guanah, Leader and Onochie (2013) are able to reflect on the diverse cultures and languages of the people that produce them. Diawara (2010: 178) interprets the films in the context of storylines dealing with "dislocations of people, social relations, economies, cultures and identities". Of course, they have improved overtime, surpassing the deficiencies of technology inroads into Africa. For instance, in Nigeria, the old Nollywood video-films are gradually making way for standardized productions popularly called the new Nollywood. This is reported by Krings and Okome (2013: 19) who argue that the new Nollywood phenomenon "…. goes hand in hand with the recent revival of a cinema-going culture – in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa". Thus, the films now get to be made on high-budget plan and with production timelines set for them. They are screened at cinema theatres at home and abroad and are produced according to global standards and formats. This is where digital technologies have taken African cinema to, beginning with the first new Nollywood film, *The Amazing Grace* (dir. By Jeta Amata) in 2006. Many more films from within Nigeria and outside have towed the model of the new Nollywood filmmaking culture and therefore can be said to present Africa with the need to re-conceptualizing the cinemas of Africa in terms of its arts, scholarship, and debates.

6. Contributions of this Study to Knowledge

The merits of this study are on different counts because while contributing to the knowledge of the present scenario of affairs in film industries across sub-Saharan Africa, it helps to conceptually theorize the nomenclature of the cinematic arts in the continent by proposing that it be considered in its plural form. In this context, it is not only beneficial to scholars in academia but also to policy makers in government who are encouraged by its contributions to look more inwardly in order to develop individual national cinemas. This, too, is a study that informs its readers of the urgency to always

interrogate labels before stamping it on a product purely on the basis of facts rather than being comfortable with following a trend inadvertently since that appears to be the norm, probably as inherited from the West or as entrenched by a hegemonic hierarchy in place. A study like this does not only seek clarifications but also challenges society in being critical of what it is ordinarily consumed on screen, in literature and in classrooms.

7. Concluding Remarks

This study has been about appraising the artistry and theorization of cinemas in Africa from inception to their present forms. It began by looking at the notion of cinema and its conceptualizations in singular and plural forms, from post-independence Africa to the present formations of films across the continent. Even though it does not specifically explore individual film industries of the nations of Africa in detail, it makes the point that ideology has generally changed from the way it was handled in the past as against what is done in the present era. Standing therefore, on the pedestal of new technologies, this study outrightly acknowledges Nollywood as a model that has successfully impacted different nations of Africa and by so doing has extended its model to other sub-nationalities. This, as seen in this paper, is the main gain of the digital revolution that has not only democratized film production but has also demystified its consumption protocols. It is in the light of this demystification and availability of cheaper technologies that people have been enabled to speak for themselves in plural voices without being hoodwinked to the old political ideology of the decolonization process of the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, reviewing scholarship and theorizations on cinemas of Africa as this study has done does not only equip readers with knowledge of its deposits but most importantly calls for all hands to be on deck in generating scholarly canons for comprehending the realities of filmscape across the continent especially in the context of availability of newer digital technologies. Truth be told therefore, in terms of production model, film form and aesthetics, African cinemas ought no longer be conceptualized in the singular but as one laden with multiple layers awaiting theoretical unpacking and comprehension

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