



Digital Filmmaking: Panacea or Scourge for African Cinema

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Background:

Cinema was introduced in Africa in the early 1920's, but it is not until the 1960's that we saw an emergence of films made by Africans filmmakers. Films made during that period, reflected the sociopolitical realities of many African nations who were gaining their independence from colonial powers. Films focused on themes that reflected post-independence nation-state building, and colonial oppression.

This trend continued into the 1970's, but took on a new form towards the end of the decade, as African filmmakers moved towards a more revolutionary pattern in their themes. At a time when African nations aligned themselves under the banners of communism or capitalism, filmmakers of that era began to explore post-colonial themes dealing with political systems influenced by ideologies from the East versus the West. As a result, Cinema of liberation or *Third Cinema*, started to emerge.

In his book "Third Cinema in the Third World – The Aesthetics of Liberation", Teshome H. Gabriel defines Third Cinema as "films that have social and political relevance, which embrace the twin aspects of filmic experience – namely, style and ideology". He further elaborates that "the principal characteristic of Third Cinema is really not so much where it is made, or even who makes it, but rather, the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays".¹ Early African filmmakers saw themselves as social and political activists more so than artists.

From its beginnings, subSaharan African cinema has been largely envisioned by its creators as a serious and functional art form, presenting realistic images of Africa from an African viewpoint. Directors have often used film as a political weapon, hoping to foster social change on the domestic front. Conceived within a didactic framework, such motion pictures depict Africa at its precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial stages.²

Production of films on the continent faced many challenges: lack of equipment, shortage of trained technical staff, and government censorship, to name a few. But on top of that list was the problem of financing. France was the only country who financed films made by filmmakers from her former colonies, and even that came with conditions. In most cases, production personnel had to be French citizens, equipment had to be rented from France, post-production had to be done in France and at the end, ownership of the film was not necessarily in the filmmaker's hands. Nevertheless, in spite of these conditions, at least francophone African filmmakers had the opportunity to make films. Filmmakers from Anglophone and Lusophone African countries did not enjoy the same

¹ Gabriel, Teshome H. *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* / by Teshome H. Gabriel. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, c1982.p 2

² Françoise Pfaff - *Cineaste* v22, n4 (Fall, 1996): 58 (2 pages)

privilege since Great Britain and Portugal did not invest in film industries of their former colonies.

Another obstacle facing African cinema related to issues of exhibition and distribution. Most African films are screened in international festivals in special segments such as “Un Certain Regard” at Cannes Film Festival. African films are rarely included in international competitions, except in the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO). Founded in 1969 in Burkina Faso, FESPACO was the only African film festival south of the Sahara until the 1990’s, when new festivals appeared on the scene, like Southern Africa’s Film and Television Market, in South Africa (1995), and the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) in Tanzania, (2002).

African films have been put in the category of festival cinema because they do not have much of a life beyond the festival route, two years on the average. Most disturbing is the fact that African films have little opportunity for exhibition on the continent itself because it is more profitable for theaters owners to rent Indian, Karate, B rated French and Hollywood films than the independently made African films perceived as too intellectual for popular consumption. For example, Ousmane Sembéne, known as the Dean of African Cinema, stated that he has an easier time showing his films in Paris than in Dakar, Senegal, his own country. African filmmakers are faced with the tragic irony of making films about their countries and their people, but the very people reflected in these films do not have a chance to see them.

Over the past four decades, financing African films has been an on-going source of discussion and debate. One solution that is often discussed is for African governments to be involved in the development of indigenous cinema through infrastructure whose objective it is to support local filmmaking. This would involve drawing up cinema legislation, imposing taxes on foreign films exhibited in-country, creating budgets through Ministries of Culture specifically for cinema, and establishing national distribution companies to facilitate the exhibition and the distribution of these films. To lobby for these objectives, the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI), a non-governmental organization, was founded in 1970. Some of the objectives of FEPACI were:

- 1) To generally promote the African film industry, to develop the cultural aspects of the cinema as part of education, development and a cultural, social and economic independence of the African peoples;
- 2) To develop a sense of solidarity among African filmmakers, in order to enable them to join their efforts with a view to defending their moral, professional and political interests; and

3) To promote distribution and commercialization of African films throughout the African continent as well as on a worldwide scale.³

A decade later, in 1981, the Committee of African Cineasts (C.A.C) was established to address the problem of distribution and exhibition. The purpose of the committee was to develop a common strategy in the areas of production, co-production and distribution of films.⁴

The problem of exhibition and distribution had been argued and discussed for 26 years with no apparent resolve. However in the 1990's, Nigeria and Ghana arrived on the African filmmaking scene with a new kind of homegrown cinema, which seems to have circumvented the problem of production, exhibition and distribution.

Digital Filmmaking and its impact on African Cinema:

In the mid 1990's up until the present we witnessed the booming of the "video-film" industry in some African nations, mainly in Nigeria, Ghana and now most recently in Ethiopia. This phenomenon is labeled "video-film" because it is not necessarily films produced in the traditional ways of cinema, but rather stories recorded on home videos. A typical director of video-film does not have a traditional filmmaking background. The new crop of directors range from merchants with access to capital necessary to produce a project, to theater actors who have the dramatic theater background and use video to record plays.

Dubbed Nollywood, Nigeria is at the forefront of this new industry producing 1,000 video-films per year, surpassing Hollywood with an average of 600 films per year and Bollywood (the Indian film industry) with 800 films per year. The Nigerian video industry relies solely on video distribution skipping all together the theatrical release route.

These locally produced films cost \$10,000 to \$15,000 each, are generally produced within the space of a month and are in profit after two to three weeks of video release. Videos sell to the public through this network of video merchants for \$3 each. One dollar goes to the producer, \$1 to the distributor and \$1 covers marketing costs. Most videos easily sell more than 20,000 units, and very quickly at that. The most successful videos sell over 200,000 units.⁵

It is not uncommon for African filmmakers to take as long as five years to obtain funds needed to make a film. Video-films, on the other hand, have attracted

³ Teshome Gabriel – Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation; 1982; p 23

⁴ Teshome Gabriel – Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation; 1982; p 23

⁵ Filmmaker Magazine – summer 2006

financial resources from the African business sector. By meeting the strong demand for African stories told by Africans, they have proven commercial viability. Using American style soap-opera formula, these video-films have gained such popularity among mass consumers that production cannot keep up with demand.

The digital age has opened up opportunities for African filmmakers to use digital video, which captures high quality images and sound, and makes post-production equally accessible. This new phenomenon, by addressing the financial and distribution challenges faced by African filmmakers, and vastly expanding accessibility, has changed the landscape of the aesthetics, form and content of African cinema. Recognizing these recent changes, FESPACO '07 included a panel discussion on this topic entitled "Cinema d'auteur et cinema populaire en Afrique" ("auteur cinema and popular cinema in Africa").

While many in the business of making video-films are in it for the profit margin, there are authentic filmmakers who can take advantage of the digital age, as well as the market niche that is now created by the video-film industry. African filmmakers can now produce their films on a small budget, and after the festival route can go directly to video distribution of their films in their respective countries. There are, however, new challenges ahead: 1) Will video-films negatively affect the standard of African cinema? 2) Is the poor quality of storytelling and production of the video-films conditioning the African filmgoer to appreciate only this type of "genre"?

Where does African cinema go from here? In spite of the great sacrifices and achievements by the pioneers of this cinema like Ousmane Sembene (Senegal), Med Hondo (Mauritania), Sarah Maldoror (Guadeloupe), Safi Faye (Senegal), Haile Gerima (Ethiopia), Djibril Diop Mambety (Senegal), to name a few, African cinema is at a crucial cross roads. Two parallel cinemas, one with a tradition of being used to espouse sociopolitical change, the other with a current trend toward a lowbrow entertainment culture.

Mbye Cham, noted scholar of African cinema, wrote the following statement in 1996 in the introduction of *African Experiences of Cinema*, by way of characterizing African Cinema:

In spite of its youth and the variety of overwhelming odds against which it is struggling, cinema by Africans has grown steadily over this short period of time to become a significant part of a worldwide film movement aimed at constructing and promoting an alternative popular cinema, one that is more in harmony with the realities, the experiences, the priorities and desires of the society which it addresses.⁶

⁶ Mbye Cham – *African Experiences of Cinema* - Edited by Imruh Bakari and Mbye B. Cham. London: BFI Pub., 1996. (p.1)

Will this characterization still hold true five to ten years from now given the fast growing video-film industry, which outputs soap opera like productions? Can the directors this new industry is producing be discarded? What place do traditional films have with the African audiences? Will digital technology increase the access that producers of higher-quality films have to African markets? How will video-films influence traditional filmmaking?

A Personal Account:

The rise of video-films causes me to consider my own creative future, as an Ethiopian filmmaker living in the US, with an MFA in Film from an American university, who plans to make films in my home country.

Like Nigeria and Ghana, Ethiopia is beginning to produce homegrown soap operas shot on video. Patrons wait in lines for hours to buy tickets made by Ethiopians about Ethiopian realities. Films like “Gudifetcha”, “Semayawi Feres”, and “Kezkaza Welafin”, have played to full houses in Addis Abeba, the capitol city, for months.

My first encounter with one of these video-films was in Washington, DC. The US promoters of the film rented the auditorium of a local university to screen, “*Kezkaza Welafin*” a video-film by Tewodros Teshome. The auditorium was filled to capacity with Ethiopian expatriates. Clearly, the Ethiopian Diaspora shares the thirst for indigenous stories.

The projection started, credits began to roll: “screenplay by Tewodros Teshome, camera by Tewodros Teshome, director of photography Tewodros Teshome, directed by Tewodros Teshome, produced by Tewodros Teshome” were some of the credits that rolled on the black screen inter cut with the beginning sequence. The filmmaker filled all of the key production positions, which is typical in video-film productions either due to lack of trained personnel or due to a director’s need to do-it-all.

The story was about the plight of Selam, a young woman from a middle class family, whose father dies, entrusting the care of his family to Ashagre, a young entrepreneur and family friend. The latter fulfills his promise only with the intention of marrying Selam, who refuses his proposal. Ashagre is infuriated and demands that the young girl’s family pays back what he invested in their care for the past five years unless Selam marries him.

Another young man, Brook, whose family owns a successful business in Addis Abeba, and who attends the university with Selam, falls in love with her and bails the family out by paying off Ashagre. Selam eventually finishes her university degree and is hired by her rescuer, Brook, who is now running his family’s business. Brook keeps courting Selam for what seems to be years, only to be turned down by her time after time.

Later we discover that though Selam has feelings for Brook, she has been turning him down because she suspects that she is HIV-positive because her previous boyfriend died of HIV/AIDS. After what seems to be an eternity, Selam finally decides to get tested and learns that she is HIV-negative. Happy ending: Brook and Selam get married and live happily ever after!

While some of the actors, with minor roles, delivered realistic depictions of the characters they played, the lead actors were either over-dramatic or just did not have any presence in front of the camera. The story was structured well, but the technical deficiencies were so evident that it rendered the story disjointed. Overall, the sound quality was poor, the actor's lines were sometimes out of synch, the composition of each shot seemed arbitrary with no objective, the use of silence was non-existent, and there was no natural or environmental sound. The killer, though, was that every possible gap between dialogues was filled with melodramatic music.

Every so often, when I dropped my "film critique" mode, I was amazed to hear intermittent clapping and laughter at what I thought was a poor delivery from an actor or an over-dramatic expression when it was not necessary. The audience was fully engaged in the film and was actually enjoying it! As the final credits rolled, the entire auditorium rang with the audiences' clapping, followed by a long standing ovation. On the way out of the theater several acquaintances stopped me and commented: "Wasn't that a great film?"

Either I was missing something here or the audience is, were re-occurring thoughts in my head. If this is the kind of "film" the audience likes, why should I bother writing complex stories with cinematic elements that drive the narrative more so than dialogue? Who am I making films for...why is the audience overlooking mediocrity? What is this the future of Ethiopian cinema?

I realize that part of "overlooking mediocrity" stems from the fact that as immigrants, we live far from our home country and seeing Ethiopian images on the screen, hearing characters speak in Amharic, make us somehow feel close to home. Because of this, viewers watch these video-films primarily with nostalgia and therefore the quality of the films become secondary. As for audiences consuming these video-films in Ethiopia, I suppose they too have been deprived of seeing their own images and hearing their language spoken on the screen. After subsequently watching several more video-films from Ethiopia and witnessing the same audience reaction, I have finally made my peace on the subject.

The bottom line is that not only are video-films here to stay, they are financially easier to make, and from the consumer's perspective, more affordable to purchase. The cadres of trained African filmmakers are also here to stay. They

too will continue to make films that espouse social and/or political change. What can the two learn from each other?

While most of these video-films mimic Hollywood-style dramas filled with sex, violence and car crashes, there are those, like “Kezkaza Welafin”, with stories that have potential to be developed further and cinematically realized to elevate their quality. The key is training.

Looking Forward:

With the dearth of African film schools, both Western and Eastern-trained African filmmakers can help develop the new crop of video-film directors by educating them in the creative and technical methods of traditional filmmaking: knowledge transfer. Conversely, we must acknowledge and learn from the achievements of these new directors. They have demonstrated that producing African films, in general, is a viable business and have elicited healthy investment from Africa’s conservative business sector. This is a feat that we, the traditional- film-school-going, shooting-on-film-only, and living-abroad filmmakers have not achieved.

Those who have studied film and been trained either in the West or the East, are by default placed in an elitist category. This holds especially true for African filmmakers who live and practice filmmaking outside of their home countries. One could argue that those in the latter category are out of touch with the pulse of their people, have elitist tendencies and therefore produce films that target the intelligencia and the festival crowd.

The reality is that, whether in Africa or in the US, the average filmgoer may not be equipped to appreciate the sometimes abstract and esoteric treatment that some traditional filmmakers give to a chosen subject. In Africa, the average filmgoer is not interested in what little discretionary money he/she has to be bombarded with abstract notions of political or economic freedom and social justice. Most viewers expect to be entertained, not reminded of their impoverished existence or daily hardships. Bollywood was successful in identifying this need and developing a formula for escapist cinema. Its success was not only evident in India but also in most developing countries, including Ethiopia, where on the average, three out of six movie theaters screened Bollywood films.

On the other hand, the newly emerging video-film directors should elevate their craft by learning more about the cinematic language and not settle for mediocre storytelling, acting, sound recording and cinematography.

In the final analysis, this could be fertile ground for a new type of cinema industry on the continent. An indigenous cinema industry could arise with distribution channels, artistic and technical maturity, and financial solvency, to offer African

audiences an array of films with content ranging for pure entertainment to those with social awareness.

As for the audience, it too will have a role in the development of cinema on the continent. The more films are produced by filmmakers from both camps, the more sophisticated the audience will be in evaluating and critiquing these films and move away from accepting mediocre productions. The content of African films should not be dictated by anyone, but the quality of the productions should be elevated to a much higher level than it is today. In the end, we will all be better practitioners and consumers of cinema.