

# The pan-Africanism we have: Nollywood's invention of Africa

By John C. McCall

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**AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS** have long proposed that a shared sense of a broadly conceived African identity is a prerequisite to true independence for the continent. African philosophers, political visionaries and artists have devoted political doctrines and movements to various conceptualizations of pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism and Negritude. While these philosophies differed in particulars, they shared a concern with transcending self-conceptions based either on localized tribal identities or the national boundaries imposed by European colonizers.

Since its inception at the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of a cultural pan-Africanism was vexed by the continent's cornucopia of cultures, languages and religions. While a certain sense of unity could be evoked from the shared experience of colonial domination and the struggle for independence, the poets of Negritude and the philosophers of pan-Africanism longed to discover and cultivate a common cultural core. They sought a deep and distinctively African rhythm that would resonate in the hearts of people from Dakar to Nairobi, providing the backbeat for a cultural poetics that could ring as true in a Congo village as on the streets of Johannesburg.

The original formulations of pan-Africanism and Negritude were built upon classical modernist notions regarding the evolution of a politically conscious populace. The arts were frequently identified as the means by which this transformation of consciousness could be realized. Cinema, an art form free of the demands of literacy, seemed an ideal medium to impart a pan-African discourse that could engage the entire continent as well as

the diaspora. The emergence of African film in the 1960s, typified by the work of Ousmane Sembène, was positioned in terms of this ideological mission. Unfortunately, the subsequent half-century of cinematic works produced by Sembène and his like-minded colleagues remain largely unknown in Africa. African film-makers' ability to engage the African audience was hindered by two key factors that have plagued African film-makers from the outset.

The first of these was the problem of political censorship. Africa's political independence from Europe did not usher in an era of expressive freedom. Leopold Senghor was one of the Negritude movement's best-known poets, and as Senegal's first president he was one of its most politically influential advocates. Nevertheless, Senghor saw to it that most of Sembène's films were banned in Senegal. Though Senghor championed the arts as central to the postcolonial project of reinventing Africa for Africans he was, like most political reformers, thin-skinned about political dissent – even when expressed by a fellow Senegalese Marxist like Sembène. Political suppression continues to remain a significant constraint on African cinema. Certain global economic arrangements, however, have proved an even greater impediment to the development of African film in Africa.

Emmanuel Sama (1996: 148–56) lucidly captured the global conditions that have contributed to the underdevelopment of African film in an essay entitled: 'African Films are Foreigners in Their Own Countries'. The thrust of Sama's argument was that virtually all of the cinema houses on the continent were foreign-owned and

had little interest in promoting the artful and politically conscious films of African film-makers. The latter were simply not able to access the foreign-controlled infrastructures that delivered cinema on the continent.

It must be noted that foreign interests funded most celluloid African films, and European review boards vetted most of the scripts. The film-makers too, were well schooled in the auteur sensibilities that appeal to such boards. The films that resulted were often politically sophisticated and aesthetically exquisite, but not necessarily targeted at African viewer sensibilities. Most of the films were of the 'art-house' variety that rarely sees distribution outside of urban centres – even in the West. This is not to say that African film-makers of the early period did not seek a broader range of viewers. Many, like Mweze Ngangura and Hubert Ogunde made films targeting a popular audience. Some even packed up projector and screen and took mobile theatres around the countryside to deliver their films. The primary audience, however, for the African cinema of the late twentieth century remained in Europe and North America.

### A cinema for Africans

While they are honoured with awards at film festivals abroad, the African films that are canonical in African Studies have made little headway in Africa. While Africa's auteurs dreamt of a pan-African film culture, the cinema houses on the continent offered Hollywood westerns and action films, Bollywood romances and Hong Kong martial arts dramas. African film languished in limited screenings at French embassies in Dakar and Bamako and at the bi-annual Festival of Pan-African Film and Television in Ouagadugu, Burkina Faso.

Celluloid film production requires extensive funds and a large crew with years of technical training. Most Africans who pursue this elite art form are schooled abroad and remain dependent on the largesse of foreign funding agencies – particularly French ones devoted to promoting French aesthetic sensibilities in their former colonies. While African cinema's advocates correctly identified foreign ownership of distribution infrastructures as the primary impediment to their access to the African market, their response was to encourage their own governments to tax or put quotas on foreign films – despite little evidence that Africans wouldn't prefer locally made media if they had the option (Diawara 1996: 104–06, Sama 1996: 155–56). As people tired of foreign films and the degenerating conditions that characterized theatres in Nigeria in the 1990s, cinema houses began to close. Virtually all of Nigeria's old movie theatres were converted to churches. Nevertheless, most of Africa's celluloid film-makers continued to cling to the notion that celluloid film



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and a vibrant cinema-house culture was the ideal forum for bringing African cinema to the African audience.

The commitment to the celluloid medium was simultaneously aesthetic and political. Not only did advocates insist that the large-screen chemical process produced an aesthetic result that was superior to that of the electronic small screen; there was also a belief that the small screen was inherently part of the systematic reproduction of capitalist ideology. Film, despite or perhaps because of its closer association with elite art, was believed to have a greater inherent potential for social critique. Thus, when advances in digital video technology made it possible to produce feature-length movies on video with little more than a camera and a computer, it was not Africa's celebrated film-makers who seized this opportunity to produce their work free from the oversight of European grant review boards. It was street-smart entrepreneurs

in Ghana and Nigeria who led Africa's video revolution. In the early 1990s marketers in Lagos, Accra and Onitsha realized that Africa's informal markets were the perfect venue to cash in on an African audience that had long been yearning for a movie culture they could call their own.

The rise of Nollywood, with its prolific output, its spectacular popularity and its unprecedented ability to reach remote and non-elite audiences, is the most radical development to date in the history of African media. Nollywood does not arise from a national cinema or foreign-funded interests. It is not particularly concerned with advancing development agendas or political movements. Indeed, one of the fascinating things about Nollywood is the fact that, while it gives a voice to a spectrum of cultural views – Christian, Muslim, traditional and folkloric – the industry appears to remain immune to exploitation by Nigeria's notoriously powerful kleptocrats. Instead, every time a corrupt governor or lascivious clergyman is exposed, the scandal is dramatized and folklorized as a Nollywood drama – enhanced with showy special effects. While Nigerian publishers and editors may risk assassination if they publish criticism of their leaders, Nollywood boldly continues to generate popular discourse on the corrupt government gaudily dressed up as entertainment.

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### Should Nollywood have a coherent message?

From a traditional critical theory perspective, many of Nollywood's stories can first appear to be apolitical melodramas – the sort of 'soap opera' morality tales that reinforce the status quo and placate the masses, even as they appear to criticize the immorality of the privileged. Critics often lament that Nollywood fetishizes wealth and violence (Okwori 2003), emphasizes glamour over substance (Adesanya 2000: 49), and reproduces oppressive female stereotypes (Garritano 2000). In general, critics argue that Nollywood lacks the ideological mission that could make it relevant to political and social transformation in Africa (Lawuyi 1997: 477–78). Jonathan Haynes (2006) has written a cogent response to those who would condemn Nollywood as politically irrelevant. Haynes examines the various forces that play upon Nollywood video producers, including a National Censor's Board that simultaneously bans videos that it finds politically subversive and castigates producers for not being politically 'responsible', i.e. too much occult sensationalism and not enough representations of Nigeria that the government considers to be socially progressive. Haynes' argument is too complex and comprehensive to successfully gloss here. In general, however, he compellingly argues that assessing the social significance of Nollywood

videos demands that we rethink well-established assumptions about what constitutes 'the political' in African film. He cautions that our theoretical assumptions and analytical methods must adapt to keep up with Nollywood and its transformation of the African mediascape.

Nollywood is the target of widespread criticism in Nigeria as well. When I spoke to Nigerians from various walks of life about the movies, common themes emerged. Nollywood movies were too violent, too obsessed with witchcraft, too Christian, not Christian enough. These criticisms were usually accompanied by detailed examples from recent video releases. It became obvious that while Nollywood had many Nigerian critics, these critics were voracious consumers of the movies. Which leads us back to my primary point: not that Nollywood provides a coherent philosophy or world-view that might be called 'pan-African', but that Nollywood is a primary catalyst in an emergent continent-wide popular discourse about what it means to be African.

Despite criticism from both elite and non-elite quarters, Nollywood has a rapidly growing audience in Africa and as a result it is beginning to generate continent-wide discourse about the problem of representing African life and its diverse cultures. While it may not be the monolithic ideology that pan-Africanists envisioned, this discourse is truly pan-African because it engages the common villager as well as the socially privileged. I agree with Haynes that we must not be too hasty to classify Nollywood as apolitical. We must be careful not to condemn it because it departs from intellectual formulations of what progressive political thought is supposed to look like. Instead we must discern what the movies actually convey, why these messages resonate broadly across the continent, and how this new medium might shape Africans' ideas about their own future. Twentieth-century pan-Africanism fell prey to Cold War politics, Marxist despotism and neocolonial economics. While a monolithic postcolonial pan-African consciousness did not emerge in the form prophesied by the pan-Africanist philosophers, this does not mean that a postcolonial pan-African consciousness is not beginning to take shape. This growing and increasingly passionate discourse about what it means to be African is not the product of programmatic philosophy or ideological 'consciousness raising'. The nascent discourse on African identity is a natural outgrowth of an emergent continental popular culture transmitted by various media – music, broadcast and satellite television and now most significantly, video movies.

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### Adorno's error

The pan-Africanist visions of Nkruma, Senghor and others were predicated upon Marxist assumptions that were char-



acteristically pessimistic about culture. It was assumed that common people were awash in ‘false consciousness’. In classical Marxism, cultural values and religious convictions were regarded as ‘ideology’ designed to keep people in their place – securely under the heels of their property-hoarding oppressors. While the classic philosophers recognized that their pan-Africanism needed to be grounded in distinctly African values and perspectives, they were ambivalent about the messy, irrational and incommensurable character of African cultures themselves.

For the pan-Africanists, it was the mission of an educated African elite to prefabricate a ‘rational’ pan-African culture capable of elevating and politicizing the consciousness of the common people. By freeing Africans from the shackles of their regressive beliefs and values, a pan-African culture could be invented that could guide Africa into the future. Unfortunately, the Marxist construction of Africa was cut from the same nineteenth-century social evolutionary cloth as the ‘white man’s burden’ of the colonialists, and pan-Africanism had all the hallmarks of a secular missionary project. Africa’s ‘common people’, however, turned out to be less gullible and more creative than Marx imagined. And culture, particularly popular culture, is no monolithic force of oppression. It is a dynamic and irreducible swirl of expressions, events, desires and products. It is always transforming, responding to its

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market and notoriously difficult to predict or regulate.

Progressive social theorists have long recognized the inadequacy of Marx’s formulation of culture. Indeed, developing an adequate critique of the culture of capitalism was the central problem confronting those theorists who struggled to salvage Marxism from its own history. The premier example can be found in the works of the Frankfurt School scholars – particularly Theodor Adorno. In *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (1944) Adorno and Max Horkheimer presented a highly sophisticated critique of the political economy of popular culture, and a prescient analysis of its ideological mechanisms. For Adorno, the most pernicious quality of capitalism was its ability to displace critical reflection and political action with commodity fetishism. Adorno pioneered the theory that a robust culture industry was capable of transforming anything – including authenticity, identity and political resistance – into a marketable product. (Think of hip-hop artists ‘keepin’ it real’ for suburban American youth in search of something authentic.) This was clearly a crucial insight that was well supported by empirical examples. Taken as a whole, however, culture industry theory was a one-dimensional analytical tool – a critical sledgehammer that could acknowledge no good coming from the popular arts.

It is instructive to remember that Adorno’s theory was constructed in response to the commercialization of jazz

## Feature African Video Film

in the 1950s. Not merely a theorist, Adorno was a critical musicologist and a symphonic composer who followed in the (then) radical school of atonal music pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. Adorno readily admitted his disdain for the common audience with its attraction to catchy melodies. He once commented: 'How the music sounds is not the point' (Antokoletz 1992: 87). For Adorno, the mission of the master composer was to disrupt the false consciousness of the common people. The composer must challenge the listeners' wanton desire for melody and toe-tapping rhythms by creating music specifically designed to avoid the pleasures of natural harmony and snappy rhythms. When one hears the music of Schoenberg today, however, it is not as disquieting as it must have seemed before World War II. When I play it for students, they often comment that Schoenberg's meandering discordant compositions sound familiar – a type of music commonly used in thriller soundtracks. It seems that the twelve-tone system was not as resistant to commoditization as Adorno believed.

Adorno considered the dissonance cultivated by jazz musicians to be of an entirely different order from that of Schoenberg. Adorno wrote:

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**Anyone who allows the growing respectability of mass culture to seduce him into equating a popular song with modern art because of a few false notes squeaked by a clarinet; anyone who mistakes a triad studded with 'dirty notes' for atonality, has already capitulated to barbarism. (Adorno 1981: 127)**

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In his best-known essay on jazz Adorno (1981) wrote that jazz was 'monotonous' (121), 'machinelike' (123), 'standardized' (124), 'lowbrow' (127), 'trivial' (128), 'superficial' (128), 'malicious' (132), 'miserable' (132), 'hostile to meaning' (128), 'ahistorical' (124–25), and even 'somasochistic' (122) and 'castrating' (129).

Adorno wrote this critique of jazz in the 1950s at the same historical moment when jazz musicians were inventing complex improvisatory techniques beyond anything ever imagined in the conservatory. Simply put, Adorno was wrong about jazz. Not merely wrong, but profoundly wrong. Adorno was also oblivious to the role jazz played in transgressing and eventually dismantling America's regime of racial segregation. While the general thrust of his observations about the exploitive potential of commercialization remain germane, he vastly underestimated the transformative potential of the popular arts. I contend that his error should serve as an object lesson for those of us who intend to evaluate the potential of Nollywood.

I contend that the very fact of Nollywood's existence illuminates problematic assumptions underlying Adorno's

notion of the 'culture industry'. Nollywood is a highly productive node of African popular culture. Yet, unlike its vertically integrated Hollywood correlate, Nollywood is radically horizontal in its organization. Instead of a handful of large corporate players, Nollywood is made up of a shifting field of countless independent contractors. Virtually anyone who can rent the equipment for a few days can become a Nollywood producer. I won't gush naively about the 'democratizing' character of the 'new media technologies'; but we do need to hesitate before dismissing Nollywood's invention of Africa with the standard 'culture industry' critique.

What positions Nollywood as a catalyst for pan-African discourse is precisely that it has no view, no agenda, no ideology. It is a sprawling marketplace of representations. Its storylines are plucked from newspapers, political rumour and urban folklore. In the scope of the industry's brief lifetime we can already see Nollywood writers responding with new and increasingly provocative perspectives to the currents of popular discourse that respond to their work. We should resist and challenge the elitist impulse to dismiss Nollywood's potential on the grounds that they are too commercial, too vulgar or too popular to take seriously as a significant cultural force on the continent. Unlike the more sophisticated work of the canonized auteurs of African cinema, Nollywood has created a pan-African forum that makes speaking of a pan-African cinema and indeed pan-African culture possible for the first time.

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### Postscript

A few years ago I was fortunate to be among a group of American scholars gathered in Dakar for an NEH Institute to discuss the current state of African cinema.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the Institute, the question of whether Nollywood movies should be taken seriously became a point of heated discussion. One day we were fortunate to have Ousmane Sembène as a guest speaker. When he completed his presentation, the first question he was asked was what he thought of the new Nigerian video movies. We were all eager to hear what the venerable father of African cinema had to say on this subject. Sembène smiled just a bit, removed the ever-present pipe from his mouth, and said that the Nigerians had found a way to reach the African audience – and that, he acknowledged – was a very great accomplishment. A true revolutionary, Sembène said that the Nigerians had shown the way to reach the African audience, and that African film-makers should rethink their devotion to celluloid film and recognize that video was better suited to the vital task at hand. ●

### Contributor details

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) describes itself as 'an independent grant-making agency of the United States government dedicated to supporting research, education, preservation, and public programs in the humanities' on its website, <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/index.html>.



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