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The Evolution of African Cinema

Within the scope of cinemas' potential as an artform lies the granting of filmmakers access to make cultural portrayals, advocate political ideas, and take artistic liberties. These concepts are further emphasized among "Third World" cinema industries, i.e. film industries within countries that are rarely represented or understood in the Western World. Ultimately, this description aligns with many film industries on the African continent. The year 1960 symbolizes a revolutionary era within African history, marking the independence of sixteen African colonies from various European powers, and the catalyzation of mass decolonization on the continent. Likewise, it marks a significant change in the continent's relationship to cinema, as it was the first time African films could be produced within Africa by African filmmakers, following the lifting of the Laval Decree within former French colonies, which had outlawed doing so previously.

Filmmakers of this era, like Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambéty, were inspired by their experiences to create films that tackled matters like neocolonialism and Pan-African identity. However, this did not define the scope of the film industry. The following generation of filmmakers, specifically within the Nollywood industry, produced films that were less outwardly "political", and more "easy-viewing", distributed through the home-video VHS market. These films, though extremely popular, were controversial, often deemed a downgrade from the works of prior filmmakers. Due to the diversity within the industry, one of the biggest questions audiences and critics ask is *Must African films be inherently political?* I will attempt to address this concern by comparing and contrasting the 1993 French-Senegalese film *Guelwaar* by Ousmane Sembene, and the 2003 Nollywood film *Osuofia in London* by Kingsley Ogoro, using the articles, "The Winds of African Cinema" by MaryEllen Higgins, and "A Break with the Past: The Nigerian Video-film Industry in the Context of Colonial Filmmaking" by Ikechukwu Obiaya, to provide further context on the evolution of the African film industry and its formal/stylistic qualities. African cinema should not be defined by how directly it approaches the objective of "decolonizing the mind", but rather its portrayal of the lives of African peoples. Such films that meet this criteria will be inevitably political, whatever their formal qualities, stylistic devices, and manners of distribution.

Ousmane Sembene is largely considered to be the “Father of African cinema” due to his success in introducing African cinema to international audiences, and creating art films that portray authentic African stories while addressing the fallout of colonialism in Africa. His acclaimed 1993 film, *Guelwaar,* depicts the story of two major groups within a Senegalese town: Christians and Muslims, as they dispute over burial claims of two members from their respective communities. Its titular character, Guelwaar, also known by his real name, Pierre Henri Thioune, is a practicing Christian and political activist who believes that accepting foreign aid only furthers African dependence on Europe and therefore impedes progress. Upon his death, it is discovered that his body has been mistakenly buried in a Muslim cemetery, due to an err made by an undertaker who misread the French-language death certificate and swapped his body for a Muslim man. The two communities spend the film fighting in resolving the matter. Sembene portrays both communities as passionate, strong-willed people, who, though separated by religion, are ultimately of the same blood.

The blending of indigenous and colonial/neocolonial elements is one of the most significant portrayals in the film. In “The Winds of African Cinema”, Higgins points out that “African films tell us about the earth’s unevenness—about gross colonial and neocolonial inequalities, uneven distributions of justice, the uneven impacts of neoliberalism” (84). Lingering neocolonialism is portrayed in various ways in the film. The use of the French language as an official language (including in government documents) in Senegal actually becomes a plot point in the film. It is a reason why the corpses of the two deceased bodies get mixed up, as the undertaker presumably is not as well versed in French as his native Wolof, thus misunderstanding the death certificate. Though Senegal was an independent nation by the time *Guelwaar* was made, neocolonialism persists through the replacement of the language native to Senegal, matching the inequalities Higgins refers to. Likewise, Guelwaars son, Barthelemy, who returns from France at the start of the film, insists on exclusively speaking French, reflecting perhaps his own internal shame about Wolof, or simply his assimilation to the culture of his colonizer. The films strong, anticolonial stance is quite apparent- notably during a climatic flashback depicting a speech given by Guelwaar, in which he stresses the importance of rejecting foreign aid and the need for unity among Senegalese and African people. Pan Africanism is a hallmark of Sembene's

films, with Higgins even noting, “Sembène’s early cinema…conceptualize(s) an African cinema ‘with nationalist and Pan Africanist beginnings’” (83).

Due to the political style favored by Sembene and other African filmmakers of his time, many audiences and critics began associating this quality with African cinema as a whole. However, when Nollywood films began to popularize, a drastically different industry hit the scene. In the article, “A Break with the Past…”, Obiaya provides some historical context to the rise of cinema in Nigeria, stating: “Following Nigeria’s independence, its filmmakers had to contend with a filmmaking legacy which brought along with it such problems as the absence of an infrastructure for feature filmmaking, funding difficulties, a lack of adequately trained personnel, inaccessible distribution channels, and an unsupportive government” (141). Due to the lack of support for a Nigerian cinema industry, aspiring filmmakers turned to the home video market to create stories. Around the early 1990s, low-budget productions were typically filmed on VHS tapes, and often considered by critics to be low quality, underproduced, and generally subpar when compared to films by other African filmmakers like Sembene. Nevertheless, their audience viewership was global. Due to the accessibility of VHS tapes, these films were easily received by Nigerian residents and diaspora, and thus the Nollywood industry, and its reputation, was born. Obiaya cites the Nollywood industry as, “produced principally by small entrepreneurs simply interested in making money” (143) and as having “adopted a model which bears no relation to the colonial filmmaking structure that was handed down” (131). The appeal of Nollywood films is that they aren’t interested in making the viewer dissect underlying meanings, but are simply tools to entertain and perhaps even *distract* their audiences. Early Nollywood filmmakers typically were born in a post-colonial Nigeria, and perhaps felt less compelled as Sembenian directors to produce outwardly anti-colonial films. This does not mean, however, that they are completely null in their implications of neocolonialism within Nigeria.

The 2003 film, *Osuofia in London*, by Kingsley Ogoro, is about a Nigerian villager who visits London to claim the estate left for him by his recently deceased brother. The film, perhaps upon first glance, appears to be a straightforward comedy surrounding a clueless man navigating a foreign country. Stylistically, it is true that the cinematography, sound mixing, and pacing of the film are of a lesser quality than preceding west-African films from the early days of the industry. But upon reviewing the circumstances in which Nollywood arose, that is understandable. When

we go deeper, we can recognize the film as a piece of satire, with several direct and indirect references to lingering imperialistic elements amongst Nigerians. For instance, the film satirizes Western perception of Africans. In a scene where Osuofia is directed to a restroom in his brother's mansion in London, he comically cannot figure out the function of the toilet; “In this country this is where you do your business” - “I am not a businessman”. Of course, this is a parody of a potential perception Westerners may have toward Africans, and irony is used in this subtle reference to “decolonizing the mind”. In another scene, where Osuofia meets with a solicitor regarding his brother's estate, who also happens to be a black man, he tells the solicitor “I know you are trying to pretend… speak a language I can understand.” This moment is meant to be comedic as it plays into Osuofia being so ditzy that he believes another black man must automatically be Nigerian/African as well, despite the man's distinct British accent. However, in the next scene, the solicitor delivers a monologue in a restroom mirror, and reveals his true Nigerian accent and identity, showcasing his need to assimilate abroad, and thus implying that international racial tensions continue to be prevalent for the African diaspora. Though *Osuofia in London* is painted as a simple Nigerian comedy, it does indeed make reference, however tenuous, to ideas portrayed by earlier African filmmakers.

The film industry of West Africa is perhaps as diverse as the region itself. Its stories transcend the boundaries of a “standard” commercial film industry and thus allow for the production of a plethora of distinct style-films that are true to the lives of African people as well as their wills. Therefore, subtle and unsubtle references to “decolonizing the mind” will inevitably play out on screen.

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