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**Contemporary African Cinema:
The Emergence of an Independent Cinema in Nigeria**

"The ability to picture oneself is a vital need. In fact, if a man were to live without the capacity of forging a picture of himself, he would have no aspirations, no desires, and no dreams of his own.

The same applies to a community, a society, and a people. A society daily subjected to foreign images eventually loses its identity and its capacity to forge its own identity.

The development of Africa implies, among other things, the production of its own images."¹

Americans, of which I am one, tend to paint Africa in extremely broad strokes, imagining a cultural homogeneity where it does not exist. In reality, the arbitrary boundaries imposed by the recent colonial past overlay a land where more than a thousand languages are spoken and where exist just as many complex cultural, social, and political systems.² In pre-colonial Africa, the most prevalent form of social organization was the small group with a central ruler or king. This organization promoted a heterogenous cultural plurality rather than a monolithic cultural unity.³ The concept of a single Africa, or even legitimate large regional cultural groupings (e.g., northern, western), simply does not match the breadth and scope of cultural diversity in Africa.

Looking between the frames of cinematic narrative we can often glimpse a self-portrait of the culture that produced it. African cinema can thus give us a valuable insight into an African cultural perspective, but it would be a mistake to apply this insight to the notion of a Pan-African cultural identity. Rather, this glimpse must be taken for what it is, a view through a small slit in a curtain, rather than a panoramic view of the entire landscape.

I have reviewed a number of African films for this paper, and while this sample size is not sufficiently large enough to support generalizations, these films have fallen into two distinct genres. The first genre ignores contemporary African life and concerns itself with mythological stories and themes. In these films, the cinematography is beautiful (by Western standards), with sweeping pans of a vast landscape, richly saturated colors, and high production values. The second genre situates itself directly within contemporary African life. In comparison to the first genre, which for the purposes of this paper I will label "traditional,"⁴ the contemporary films do not have the same stunning visual qualities, in fact there is an overall visual flatness to them. The production values of these films are poor by Western standards, and make way for the film's moralizing narrative, a narrative that typically leads from the clash between modern (contemporary post-colonial) and traditional (pre-colonial) African culture. While these two genres may not be representative of African cinema as a whole, they highlight two countervailing trends that provide, for a Western audience, an inside glimpse of African culture and values. For this reason, a close look at two of these films is a valuable exercise. *Yeelen* is a 1987 Malian movie by Souleymane Cissé that I will examine as an example of an African movie in the traditional genre. *Thunderbolt*, a 2001 Nigerian movie by Tunde Kelani is an example of the contemporary genre. *Thunderbolt* comes out of a new class of African movies known as Nigerian video film – or Nollywood – that has arisen since the 1990's

Before looking at the films, however, it must be stressed that reading a film from a cultural and geographical distance creates some significant problems. Principal among these is the reading of cultural markers that are significant in one culture but are not present, or of opposing meaning, in the other culture. The tendency in the viewer is to interpret these cultural markers in the context of their own experience, and because Western cinema has such a large body of critical and theoretical text, meanings are most often interpreted (or misinterpreted as the case may be) in these terms. As a simple example, in many Western films the blonde-haired blue-eyed female is a symbol of beauty, whereas in African films, this same figure is a symbol of cultural imperialism. For another example, the color of mourning in Western cinema is black. In African cinema it is white. Animal slaughter (ritualized or vernacular) is commonplace in African cinema,

as it is in African indigenous culture, whereas in Western cinema, in a culture where meat typically comes wrapped in plastic from the grocery store, this is considered animal cruelty. It is important, therefore, for a Westerner when viewing African film to try to get beyond the cultural curtain that is imposed by preconceptions developed over a long history of Western cinema culture.⁵

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that filmmaking in the Western African states is an almost entirely post-colonial activity.⁶ Most of the Western African states gained their independence in the years from 1958 to 1962. In independence, the Africans inherited a colonial political and physical infrastructure characterized most notably by autocratic centralism. By and large, the modern (i.e. post-colonial) independent African nations, although born under the ideal of an indigenous socialism, have stepped into the behavior and status systems that were set up and then abandoned by the colonial powers. Colonialism took over an existing social structure – one tempered and balanced over thousands of years of African history. It bastardized and perverted this structure for the benefit of the Empire. After independence, the legacy of this colonial power structure remains, and will continue to influence African political systems for many years to come. This legacy of the colonial period means that, for the typical African, independence has meant very little. This then is the basic contradiction of postcolonial African states – political independence within a colonial social structure with life for the vast majority of the population unchanged since at least the nineteenth century.⁷ This contradiction provides the context for viewing African films.

Film scholars such as Mbye C Cham have examined the post-colonial nature of African film. In his view, the immediate postcolonial period was a time of both heady nationalism and socio-economic decay. Far more than mere entertainment, Cham viewed African film as a medium that could help decolonize minds and promote critical reflection on African cultures and traditions. He saw it as a site for political and socio-cultural discourse.⁸ In Cham's analysis, there are three general categories of films in Africa. In the first category are films that attempt to utilize cinema as a mode of political and socio-cultural discourse. Filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène (*Mandabi*) and Souleymane Cissé (*Yeelen*) fall into this category.⁹ A second category appropriates motifs and formulae from non-African sources -- Hollywood, Indian, Kung Fu -- and dresses them in appropriate African garb. In these movies the socio-political component takes a back seat to entertainment. These films create an outlet of escape for a populace that has been raised on a diet of foreign films. The third category of film is the hegemonic foreign, particularly Hollywood, film that holds a virtual monopoly on African theatres.¹⁰ To Cham, these films represent the continuation of imperial subjugation by proxy. While it is easy to see the legitimacy of Cham's viewpoint, his analysis assumes a somewhat rarified critical audience in African film theatres that really does not match the contemporary African reality. Cham's categorization, additionally completely ignores contemporary Nigerian video film.

In fact, in many scholarly articles about African cinema, the Nigerian video film phenomenon is not even mentioned. It is simply outside of the purview of the critical African cinematic tradition, a tradition beginning in the early post-colonial period and supported largely by foreign investment and government support. African cinema from this tradition has, to be sure, garnered great critical success in the West. Nigerian video film, or Nollywood, on the other hand, has grown up independent of government and

foreign support and has received very little critical acclaim. It is most often described in derogatory terms. The government, in fact, worries that Nigeria's emergent independent film industry reflects badly on the country.¹¹ In 1999, Ademola James, the director of the Nigerian National Film Censors Board wrote a stern memo complaining about films that were "dominated by the exploitation of 'negative tendencies' in Nigerian culture including 'occultism, cultism, fetishism, witchcraft, devilish spiritualism, uncontrolled tendency for sexual display, bloodiness, incest, violence, poisoning, etc.'"¹²

In the 1980's and 1990's the IMF debt of African countries and the subsequent devaluation of African currency made it financially difficult for filmmakers to make films in Africa. This led many African filmmakers to pursue partnerships with production houses of the West, particularly France. In some ways, this promoted a re-colonization of Black African film initiatives with Western cultural values.¹³ This may explain why movies such as *Yeelen* have achieved critical success in the West whereas Nigerian video film largely flies under the radar of the Western cinematic consciousness. That these natively African movies have not achieved Western critical acclaim is perhaps not so surprising given that they are not bound to looking at the world through the Western cultural lens.

Yeelen is a creation myth. Its primary plot line involves the pursuit of a son by a father who is threatened by the son's power and wants to destroy him. It can be viewed, therefore, as a universal narrative with Oedipal overtones. But within this overall narrative, the structure is somewhat nonlinear and not clearly sequential -- an aspect that violates the expectations of a Western critical audience. As a result, some critics have characterized *Yeelen* as being "uneven", or have described it using such culturally loaded terms as "crude" or "primitive." Leo Goldsmith, however questions, this assessment.

"Technically, the film is by no means crude or primitive. It boasts a complex sound design and stunning cinematography by Jean-Noel Ferragut and Jean-Michel Humeau. And the film's director, Souleymane Cissé, was hardly a novice, having studied filmmaking in the Soviet Union and made several films in Mali since the 1960s. In any case, there is much to suggest that the film was not the work of amateurs and that its structure did not arise out of an imperfect understanding of the medium. Rather it is as likely that Cissé is adapting the narrative structures of the oral traditions of Mali, or that he is embracing the formal complexity of contemporary European films, or even combining these styles into a new narrative language all his own. Like the folklore of nearly any culture (even one less remote than that of Mali), the story of *Yeelen* draws from a complex tradition, which, though full of resonances and implications of meaning, is not wholly reducible or assimilable into Western interpretive language."¹⁴

This highlights the sometimes-schizophrenic nature of African film criticism. Although Goldsmith's assessment of the film indicts the Western critical audience for its lack of ability to understand the movie within its African cultural context, he does so by evaluating it in purely Western terms.

From the moment that the opening text appeared on the screen at the beginning of *Yeelen*, I was left with the unshakable impression that I, the Western viewer, was the intended audience for this movie. Or if it was not made for a Western audience, then at

least it was targeted towards an audience with an appreciation for the aesthetic properties valued by Western culture. This is not to say that it was a low-production value version of a movie in the Hollywood trope. On the contrary, the production values were very high, and the story line remained true to its base in African mythology. However, these production values themselves raised my suspicion that the target was not an African audience. And while I appreciated the opening text explaining the mythology upon which the movie was based, I was struck by the feeling that I was in elementary school being told a story in very simple terms so that I could understand it. I suspect that an African audience would understand these things without the opening text. The text was, I suspect, directed at me, the Western viewer.

Undoubtedly, when viewed from an afro-critical perspective, there are many valid grounds on which to base a criticism of movies such as *Yeelen*. From this perspective, we can point at these movies as being a co-opted re-colonialization of African aesthetics through the involvement of Western capital, Western cultural values, Western training of the directors and cinematographers. However, the fact remains that they are far closer to an indigenous African cinema than what preceded it. In the years leading up to the 1980's, the United States dominated African movie distribution, with movies as culturally offensive as "Tarzan," with its subjugation of black Africans by a superior white man, and American "Westerns," with their slaughter of indigenous non-white native populations by tough white guys. And these movies were distributed in rural areas by mobile Silimi Ofe (free cinema) vans that would pull into the villages and show movies preceded by advertisements and interspersed with breaks in which merchants would sell their products.¹⁵ With this as a context, movies such as *Yeelen* seem in comparison, absolutely culturally enlightened. Despite the fact that these films came through a Western filter, and that the colonizing influence of these films is a valid criticism, they point to a rising Western awareness of African culture and can be seen as a necessary step towards the development of a true African cinema.

Roy Armes explains that African films of the 1980's tended to re-examine the roots of African culture; shying away from depictions of contemporary African life, they drew inspiration from traditional African story-telling culture.¹⁶ *Yeelen*, with its 1987 release date falls right in this time-period and is an example of this turn in African cinema. Armes posits that the roots of this turn are threefold: "to avoid censorship, to search for pre-colonial African traditions that can contribute to the solution of contemporary problems, and to develop a new film language."¹⁷ When viewed in this light, *Yeelen*, set in an unspecified distant past, can be interpreted as contemporary morality tale. The opening text to the film, "Heat makes fire and the two worlds (earth and sky) exist through light" and the ensuing drama of the world's rebirth through cleansing fire, when viewed as an allegory, can easily be applied to 20th century African culture. Yet the (I suspect unintentional) irony of the film is that this very African message is being delivered in a medium inaccessible to most Africans, and using a visual language borrowed from the West. This movie is a "foreigner in its own land."¹⁸

Nigerian video film, on the other hand, developed independent of Western support and funding. And although it churns out roughly 600 titles a year, making Nigeria one of the worlds top film-producing nations, Nigerian video film, perhaps because it is perceived as a snub of well-meaning ex-colonial paternalism, lives on the far fringes of the Western cinema consciousness. Few international distribution channels for Nigerian

video films have been opened. As a result, local distributors have supported Nigerian video films financially, and the content tends towards regional and local cultural preferences.¹⁹

Nollywood came about by accident. In 1992, “Kenneth Nnebue, a Nigerian trader based in Onitsha, was trying to sell a large stock of blank videocassettes he had bought from Taiwan. He decided that they would sell better with something recorded on them, so he shot a film called 'Living in Bondage' about a man who achieves power and wealth by killing his wife in a ritualistic murder, only to repent later when she haunts him. The film sold more than 750,000 copies and prompted legions of imitators.”²⁰ Thus began Nollywood.

Nigerian video film developed with local capitalism rather than foreign sponsorship -- the films have been produced almost exclusively with Nigerian money. These videos, therefore, respond to local market forces and in fact pander to local tastes in very specific ways.²¹ And as much as any other factor, the economic success of this industry is a result of a production and distribution system that completely bypasses the movie theatre distribution system. At the time Nigerian video film began to emerge, movie theatres had become dangerous and disreputable, typically a place for conducting illicit business.²² Families shunned them, and tickets were expensive by Nigerian standards. The Nigerian video film offered an attractive alternative. The video films were not very expensive to purchase; they could be watched in a home environment; friends and extended family could be invited to watch as a group. And typically the movies are morality tales.²³

The typical budget for a Nollywood production is \$40,000, with a shooting schedule of about two weeks. Post-production is accomplished on a personal computer, and the finished movie is sent directly to DVD or VCD disk for distribution. This model has produced an industry that is now third in line in revenues, trailing only Hollywood and Bollywood (India's film industry). More importantly, however, is the unique cultural moment that these movies have created. These are African movies, being produced by Africans, about Africans, for Africans.²⁴

What this means for Africans is that now, for the first time, their own particular voice can be expressed in the medium of film. These films tell African stories from the African perspective. They use symbolic storytelling themes and tropes pulled from the extremely long African tradition of oral history. They do not request or require Western judgment. This is African film, freewheeling and beholden to nothing but the African market.

Popular Nigerian video film tends to shy away from overt political themes. And although Nigerian video film arose during an era of unprecedented military repression, military protagonists are almost completely absent. Additionally, a major theme in these films is the acquisition of wealth, many times ill-gotten wealth with resultant consequences, yet these films ignore the most obvious source of ill-gotten wealth in Nigeria, that is, military patronage.²⁵ But it is not difficult to see the reason why. Because the industry is completely self-funded and because the producers of these movies are working on such tight budgets, the financial consequences of a single banned film would put most of them out of business.²⁶ The culture of opposition expressing itself in many guerilla print and broadcast media in Nigeria generally does not extend itself overtly into Nigerian video films. However, this is not to say that these films are apolitical. On the

contrary, commentary about state power is often expressed through allegorical depictions of traditional and historical kingship and chieftaincy.²⁷

The director Tunde Kelani is considered one of the best of the Nigerian video film directors. And in a completely non-scientific sampling of blog postings on Nigerian cinema web sites, the “Mainframe” production company that he works for is also highly respected by Nigerian film viewers. I was able to obtain a copy of the Mainframe production of one of Tunde Kelani’s video films, *Thunderbolt*.

Thunderbolt involves the story of an Igbo woman, Ngozi, married to a Yoruba man, Yinka. The tension between these two cultures is expressed by the fact that one of Yinka’s friends questions her fidelity in marriage by saying, “She’s young and she’s Igbo.” And Yinka tends to believe his friend over Ngozi’s protestations about the tradition of Igbo fidelity.

As the film goes on Ngozi is visited by one of her ancestors, probably her grandmother, in the guise of an old man in the market. The old man (carrying the walking stick of Ngozi’s grandmother) warns her that a curse, Mangu, has been placed upon her by these suspicions of infidelity and that anyone with whom she has sexual relations will die. Furthermore if she does not seek treatment from traditional African herbalists within nine weeks she will also die. Mangu is described by one character as Thunderbolt AIDS highlighting an intermingling of this contemporary disease with traditional folklore. Enter another character into the plot, Djemi, a physician trained in the Western scientific tradition who has amorous feelings for Ngozi and who has very little respect for the African herbalists. Although skeptical, Ngozi agrees to undergo an arduous and expensive cure prescribed by the herbalists. At the end of the treatment regimen, the herbalists want to test her cure by being nearby when she has sexual relations with a man. Yinka will have nothing to do with this, so she gets Djemi to agree to the test. He agrees as long as it is done in his hospital, and attended by his medical colleagues. Cut to a quite interesting image of three African herbalists in full traditional dress next to two white-coated doctors in a medical waiting room politely ignoring what is going on behind a black privacy curtain next to them. But from behind the black privacy curtain comes a scream. Djemi has been overcome by Mangu. The herbalists leap to his aid and save him with their traditional remedies while the Djemi’s colleagues trained in Western medical techniques stand helplessly by. There is some implication in the end that Djemi and Ngozi live “happily ever after” with Yinka out of the picture.

The main point of the film, the moral if you will, is not at all difficult to read. The film is a validation of traditional African beliefs and customs in the face of Western acculturation. It is a reassertion of the strength of pre-colonial traditions and their continued strength in the modern world. In another scene an African physician is making a presentation to his colleagues and asserts that although there is no Western scientific basis for it, the treatments of the African herbalists work at least as well as Western techniques. The reaction in the conference audience to this doctor’s presentation is one of skepticism, derision, and in fact our friend Djemi walks out of the conference in disgust.

There is a second slightly subtler moral in the film. Kelani openly acknowledges cultural tensions within Nigerian society, but at the same time presents a belief in the strength of a pan-Nigerian cultural identity that transcends the cultural animosities. He offers a simple prescription for how this cultural tension can be dealt with in the closing scene of the film. The final conversation of the film is Ngozi and Djemi talking about

Yinka and his less-than-admirable behavior. Djemi is wondering if Ngozi will henceforth dislike all Yoruba men based on her experience. Ngozi replies that “there are only two tribes, good and bad people.” With Ngozi’s statement Kelani makes clear his theme that despite cultural tensions there is a single Nigerian identity that transcends these differences.

Whereas Tunde Kelani is perhaps the most respected filmmaker in Nigerian video film, The trailers and previews that were included on the videotape show a glimpse of the rest of the world of Nigerian video film. This glimpse gives credence to the description of Nigerian video film by Olaf Möller in the magazine “Film Content.”

“...absurdly ardent acting, the absence of anything remotely resembling craftsmanship beyond keeping the actors in frame (forget focus), dialogue-drowning soundtrack noise, sub-amateur-porn production values, and, above all...ultra-twisted stories featuring, on occasion, money-spewing mummies (did I mention the gloriously ridiculous special effects?) and always ending with a moral so heavy you would need a crane to lift it”

“If you're ready for something like nothing you've seen before, and are prepared to set aside your preconceptions about what constitutes cinema and view the world through a different lens, then get onboard. Here's the African experience in all its violent contradictions: corrupt cops paying a visit to a witch doctor in a BMW, curses that can turn a woman into a vagina dentata, jolly jesters and born-again Christians, occasionally all-singing, all-dancing. It's sheer invention, born of utter poverty, from people desperate to tell themselves stories, to forge a cinema culture of their own.”²⁸

In this paper I have looked briefly at two major directions in African filmmaking. The first genre I will call African Cinema. In this genre we see beautiful films that are attempting to find a voice for African culture in the global arena. They deal with African themes and utilize the African story-telling tradition. They are technically advanced and fit comfortably within the canon of Western cinema critique. For just this reason, however, these films seem to have actually lost their authentic African voice. By adopting the Western model of filmmaking, playing by Western cinematic rules, they subjugate the actual African experience to a representation of the African experience in order to make it palatable to a Western audience. These films have a great deal of value in educating a Western audience to traditional African culture and mythology, but fall short of raising African Cinema to the status of a sovereign and equal visual culture – they represent a visual culture colonized by the West.

The Nigerian video film phenomenon has nothing of the technical polish of African Cinema. It does not play by any of the Western cinematic rules, in fact it ignores them completely. It does not take its imaginative or ideological direction from West, and it is not tied by the strictures of foreign capital investment. It is this fact that allows Nigerian video film to maintain its authentic African voice. Paradoxically ignored or denigrated by most cinema theorists, Nigerian video film signals the emergence of a unique and autonomous African cultural form – an exciting cultural moment.

¹ Gaston Kaboré, "The Ability to Picture Oneself: A Vital Need," in *L'Afrique Et Le Centenaire Du Cinéma*, ed. Pan-African Federation of Film-Makers (Paris: Présence africaine, 1995).

² Imruh Bakari, Mbye B. Cham, and British Film Institute., *African Experiences of Cinema* (London: BFI Pub., 1996), 175.

³ Roy Armes, *African Filmmaking : North and South of the Sahara* (Bloomington ; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 6.

⁴ I use the label traditional in the sense that these films deal with a depiction of traditional African culture. However, this term is somewhat problematic when applied to these films because the films themselves use a distinctively western cinema trope in their formulation.

⁵ Gabriel H Teshome, "Other Places, Other Approaches," in *L'Afrique Et Le Centenaire Du Cinéma*, ed. Pan-African Federation of Film-Makers (Paris: Présence africaine, 1995), 238.

⁶ Armes, *African Filmmaking : North and South of the Sahara*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ Mbye C. Cham, "Filming the African Experience," in *L'Afrique Et Le Centenaire Du Cinéma*, ed. Pan-African Federation of Film-Makers (Paris: Présence africaine, 1995), 201.

⁹ Sembènè's film *Mandabi* dealt with the clash of cultures between a traditionally valued Muslim man and an inhumane post-colonial bureaucracy. Cissé's film *Yeelen*, discussed elsewhere in this paper, is a film adaptation of a traditional African myth.

¹⁰ Cham, "Filming the African Experience," 206.

¹¹ "Nollywood Dreams," *Economist*, 7/29/ 2006.

¹² Jonathan Haynes, "Political Critique in Nigerian Video Films.," *African Affairs* 105, no. 421 (2006): 512.

¹³ Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 306.

¹⁴ Leo Goldsmith, *Yeelen: Mali-1987* (2004 [cited November 11 2006]); available from <http://www.notcoming.com/reviews.php>.

¹⁵ Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 109.

¹⁶ Armes, *African Filmmaking : North and South of the Sahara*, 122.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ John C McCall, "Madness, Money, and Movies: Watching a Nigerian Popular Video with the Guidance of a Native Doctor " *Africa Today* 49, no. 3 (2002): 80.

¹⁹ Olaf Möller, *Nigerian Videofilm Culture: A Homegrown Hybrid Cinema of Outrageous Schlock from Africa's Most Populous Nation* (March/April 2004) (Film Society of Lincoln Center, 2004 [cited November 11 2006]); available from <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/3-4-2004/nvideo.htm>.

²⁰ "Nollywood Dreams."

²¹ Moradewun Adejunmobi, "English and the Audience of an African Popular Culture; the Case of Nigerian Video Film," *Cultural Critique*, no. 50 (2002): 77.

²² McCall, "Madness, Money, and Movies: Watching a Nigerian Popular Video with the Guidance of a Native Doctor ": 80.

²³ Ibid.: 91.

²⁴ Abraham McLaughlin, "Africans, Camera, Action: 'Nollywood' Catches World's Eye," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 20 2005.

²⁵ Adejunmobi, "English and the Audience of an African Popular Culture; the Case of Nigerian Video Film," 80.

²⁶ Haynes, "Political Critique in Nigerian Video Films.," 513.

²⁷ Ibid.: 515.

²⁸ Möller, *Nigerian Videofilm Culture: A Homegrown Hybrid Cinema of Outrageous Schlock from Africa's Most Populous Nation*.

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