

***Cinema from and for Africa: Nollywood, Ghallywod, Lollywood
and more***

In 1992 Kenneth Nnebue, a Nigerian trader, bought in Taiwan a shipment of blank videotapes at a very low price. He soon realized that it would be impossible to sell them in his country: who on Earth would buy a blank, empty, boring, videotape? No way! In order to recover at least part of his money he decided to run a new risk, and he hired a well known theatre director, Chris Obi Rapu, to make the cheapest possible movie, so that he would record it in those videotapes that otherwise would never find their way in the market. The result was *Living in Bondage*, the story of a widow farmer, lost in a big city, who is pursued relentlessly by the cursed soul of his deceased wife. The trader made the business of his life and had to order more and more shipments of blank videotapes from Taiwan, because he sold one million copies of his movie. *Living in Bondage* was so successful that a drug addict from Lagos told a journalist from *The Economist* that watching the film had been the most addictive thing he had ever tried.

From that moment, more and more investors have been crowding the Idumota market (in Lagos, the financial capital of Nigeria), to join the business of making low budget movies, in the purest "youtube" style.

Albeit the inexistence of neither studios nor film sets, making movies is a prosperous business structured around the investors-traders, who in that market are the closest figure to the traditional producers, but with no intervention in the filmmaking process. These investors buy a script every six months -there is a legion of itinerant scriptwriters around Idumota-, and they then hire an executive producer and the technical and artistic crews in pan-African castings where actors from everywhere in the continent are combined, so that the movies can sell well in all markets. The movie is then shot fast in the lesser number of location in the streets of Lagos and Abuja, with high definition digital cameras -they abuse the hand held camera, as in Nordic dogma cinema- with limited of no lighting or sound work, without permits of shooting plans, in the middle of improvisations, policemen (who try to stop the shooting), people (who walk by and can't stop watching), other shooting crews and actors who usually wear their own clothes when performing.

As soon as the editing, quick and subordinated to the straight narrative, is finished -in Nigeria a postproduction job can be barely found -, the investor-trader makes the copies of the film in the Alaba district (also in Lagos), and focuses on the fast supply of the market with thousand hundreds of DVDs for the domestic and

semi-public consumption. Paradoxically, in the capital of African cinema there are only three movie theaters, but they have unaffordable prices for the population (moreover, only 25% of the population live in cities, which means that 75% of the people are just unable to go to a cinema). Movies, therefore, are watched home, in hotels, in buses, in the airports, and also watched by African emigrants all over the globe... The copies cost 1\$ (more or less, it is the standard price), and all the efforts of the investor-traders are directed to recover their investment in the two following weeks after the release -that is called the "Mating Season"-, for that is the time that takes the pirates to get the movie, copy it and distribute it illegally throughout the whole continent.

The aesthetics of this new type of cinema are in themselves the answer to the unstoppable problem of the piracy. It might seem that the pirates are the enemy number 1 of Nollywood, but that would be wrong, though. The truth is that they have been the builders of the pan-African market: for their distribution of the movies, the investors-traders already count on the illegal commerce of the copies, since the thieves are the only possible exporters in a continent where the traditional methods cannot work due to the deficient communications, the enormous barriers posed both by the geography, and also by the economic and political

state of things. The pirates are able to efficiently deliver the merchandise, and movies are sold for money or for other goods such as arms. The movies themselves work as a coin to bribe the corrupted government employees and the custom agents, and *The Economist* has referred that the Ivorian rebels postpone fighting when receiving a new shipment of DVDs. In a continent with scarce and slow internet connections and with a terribly boring TV with a few poor local channels, African-made movies are the only entertainment.

Nollywood budgets are quite discrete, up to \$100,000. Desmond Akudinobi started working in the film industry in 1999 and by 2005 he financed his first title, *Without Apology*, with \$20,000. He has produced ten more movies in the last five years, at the same regular production rhythm of his colleagues in a country where 50 new films are released every week, something impossible to imagine in the US or in Europe and quite similar to the biggest film industry in the world, the Indian Bollywood.

The success of this cinema is easy to explain. In an industry with almost no aesthetic pretensions regarding the cinematography technique, the reason of its success can be mainly found on the scripts. Nollywood scripts dwell in the eternal topics -sex, love, violence, horror- but they do it in their particular African version, where stories become

the reflection of the everyday conditions of the young population (the mid-age there is 19, whereas in Europe is almost 40): the experience of the newly arrived to the big cities, full of criminals; plots about sexual identity conflicts (there are many gays and travesties among the characters); conflicts caused by couples from different religions, especially Islam and Christianity (such as in *One God One Nation*); the surprising effects of witchcraft and superstition, together with an militia of evil spirits; jealousy, betray, vengeance inside families... Scripts that tell the stories of individuals who heroically survive to the transition from a tribal, primitive world, to a new dynamic society potentially hostile, where there is no clear room for the genuine faith and where the tradition and the trust on the others are quite diffuse.

This phenomenon of African demand of autochthonous cinema has united a continent where hundreds of thousand languages are spoken (only in Nigeria there are more than 500 languages) and where the old metropolis left varied languages such as English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, and where, in addition, part of the population is illiterate and can't read subtitles. Without money to dub the movies (and if there was, to which language, among hundreds in each territory?), it has been English the language chosen to become the language of African cinema,

and this has happened with no colonialist coercion. The English spoken in the Nollywood movies carries on the accents of different regions -due to the pan-African castings-, although it is especially the Nigerian accent the one that is becoming more imitated among teenagers in all countries.

The English is not the only instrument -freely and naturally chosen- to build a homogeneous audiovisual market in Africa. The other tool is the Christian religion, for it is the love of Christ (!!!) the antidote that the afflicted characters usually find to heal their battered bodies and souls. It is quite common to find church scenes in Nollywood movies. Again, as in the case of the choice of English, the official Churches have had little to do with this peak of belief: from 17 millions of evangelical Christians forty years ago, after one decade of African cinema there are 400 millions. In fact, many actors have been lately becoming Christians and even preachers, such as the actress, producer and preacher Helen Ukpabio. It is not rare to reading the sentence "To God Be the Glory" at the end of the credits.

Films are also awakening the political consciousness. Subtly and carefully, the movies are including topics that are still a taboo in many countries. For example, in *The President Must Not Die*, a honest head of state is killed in

a covered assassination. The Nigerian-Ghanan coproduction *Somewhere in Africa* narrates the highs and lows of the leader of a military dictatorship, in a script that recollects the main moments of the former dictators of Uganda, Liberia and Nigeria (Idi Amin, Charles Taylor and Sani Abacha).

The political effects of the birth of this cinema are quite often as extravagant and extreme as the film plots: from the ban of the Nigerian movies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (not much effective in a country full of smugglers), to protectionist measures such as the exclusive fee imposed by the government of Ghana to the foreign directors and producers (\$5,000) and to the actors (\$1,000) who aim to enter the country. The official explanations for these aggressive measures are varied, but they all have in common the fear to a "Nigerianisation" of the continent.

On the other hand, there are many politicians who preferably see the positive side of the impact of the African cinema in the lives of citizens, and therefore take advantage of the popularity derived from being close to members of the *Star System*. Sierra Leone president, Ernest Bai Koroma, became friends with Nollywood superstar Genevieve Nnaji (she has even appeared in American Oprah Winfrey's Show) and asked her to accompany him in his presidential campaign; Kenya's prime minister, Raila

Odinga, often wears the *agbada* (the traditional Nigerian clothing so frequent in movies) to the parliament.

In the same way, many African companies have found in Nollywood movies an optimal window to introduce their goods in many countries at a time.

It is outstanding the fact that the cheap cinema that built Nollywood has inspired an African cinema followed by the audiences of varied countries, countries with their own tastes and cultural preferences and, in some cases, ancestral enemies of the ones who export the same movies they now admire. The majority of the African population has never left the country of origin, and many people are coming to terms with other regions thanks to the locations and actors they see in movies... as if from the starting point of Nollywood a sort of "African identity" was gaining its form in the mind of audiences proud of their own cinema. The very famous director (famous in Africa) Lancelot Idowu said to *The Economist* that "Nollywood is the voice of Africa, the answer to [the distorted version of the] CNN".

The success of the autochthonous cinema has more positive side effects for the African economy. Some countries are following the example of Nigeria and have launched their own film industries: Ghana and Liberia have their "Ghallywood" and "Lolliwood"; South Africa, Tanzania and

Cameroon have produced hundreds of movies in the last five years; and Kenya has established its glamorous ceremony for the annual film awards.

The film industry is so competitive nowadays that the investors have already started changing their strategies, and this change will surely end up increasing the quality of the final products. The first decision has been to invest in better equipment; the second, to look for alternative locations -more and more movies are now taking place out of cities-, an original feature that the audiences will probably thank and that will let the producers face cheaper productions, for the crews are being taken to cheaper, rural areas; the third biggest decision is the consequence of the intentions of many investors to raise their expectations of quality, and therefore screening the films in movie theaters. This is opening new areas of investment, and investors want to put money in the African entertainment business, especially in opening new theaters in the biggest cities.

It is very surprising seeing how Europe and Africa seem to walk in opposite directions regarding the movie theaters: while in Europe they are closing, many screening rooms will probably be opened in Africa in the coming years... both situations being a consequence of the piracy. While piracy has inspired a private audiovisual consumption in Europe

and has therefore moved audiences away from public screenings, in Africa that same piracy has generously fed a market for the private consumption, and has later prepared the people for the collective way of watching movies. While in the developed world the cinemas are in disgrace, in Africa they have some decades of "Grace" just ahead.

With this evolution, one can foresee that in the near future a number of good African movies will seduce audiences everywhere in the planet.