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**Culture, Identity, Nationalism and the African Cinema:
The Dream and Current Challenges**

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Introduction

Filmmaking being a construction process whereby someone has to decide on what story needs to be told, how the story is to be told, how to compose the picture and the choices to be made in the selection and arrangement of images and sound that finally appear on the screen, lends itself to the issue of *re-presentation*.

This social process of representation occurring as a result of the interactions between the viewer and the film produces clearly identifiable signs that reflect underlying sets of ideas and attitudes that relate to *ideology*.

Several questions begin to emerge as we probe the authenticity of these images and sounds that have been made to represent a people, call it a nation. To attempt to find answers to these questions and more requires the identification of the ideological base of the film and its maker. Which set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideas characterize the consciousness of the people at that given historical moment as determined by social, economic, and historical factors? Is there a collective or individualized effort? Did the filmmaker make the decisions consciously or otherwise?

This paper, using Ghana as an example, seeks to explore the ways in which African cinema has, at different times, composed images of national cultures, with representations of several issues manifested and serving to represent the nation to itself and to the world. It looks at films by older filmmakers in comparison with current video productions by young professionally trained as well as the film enthusiasts turned entrepreneurs and discusses a number of problems that arise in interpreting some of the images contained in the selected films.

Historical Development

The development of filmmaking in Ghana has its beginnings in the colonial period when the British colonial government selected three people from the Gold Coast for training in order to man the newly established Gold Coast Film Unit to produce films with local content to support the colonial governance. Film during this period served as educational tool to help enforce some government policies. They were mainly documentaries sought to make people pay taxes willingly, offer themselves for recruitment to fight in World War II for His Majesty's Government, etc.

After independence in 1957, President Kwame Nkrumah restructured the film unit into a state corporation, Ghana Film Industry Corporation [GFIC] with the mandate to reconstruct the minds of the people to believe they can survive the freedom from colonial rule. The government recruited young creative talents, sent them abroad for training (mainly to then USSR and India) and returned to run the corporation. A lot of documentaries on the developmental efforts of the government were produced in addition to news reportage of key events both within the country and the continent at large. It is significant to note that President Nkrumah made sure everywhere he went a camera crew accompanied him. The formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the independence of several African countries during the early 60s were well documented on film because Nkrumah played significant roles in these events.

Nkrumah also tasked the nation's foremost creative artists like Joe deGraft and Efua Sutherland to make feature films that will both educate as well as entertain Ghanaians. This led to the experimentation with adaptations of Shakespearean plays and local traditional folklore. Two significant films were produced from this venture in 1965: *Hamile* an adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet [set in Northern Ghana and shot entirely on location] and *No Tears for Ananse*, based on a popular story from the Ananse folktale.

When Nkrumah's government was overthrown in 1966, the film corporation continued to operate but without the zeal and support of government as before. Tagged 'Nkrumah's Propaganda Machinery' [Meyer 2001] successive governments did not see GFIC as a key aspect of the developmental agenda and so did not even formulate policies for proper regulation of the operations of the industry. This neglect culminated finally in the sale of the corporation in 1996 [under the divestiture of state corporations programme], leaving the production of movies in the country entirely in private hands with neither direct state support nor a national regulating policy.

In the mid-80s, severe economic hardships led to the decline of making of celluloid films due to the rising cost of production. In its stead came the video revolution where movies were made on tape cheaply using consumer camcorders. Spearheaded by untrained film enthusiasts, these productions came to fill a vacuum created by the inability to import foreign films or produce films locally. Though technically inferior, these video productions were nonetheless very popular because of their appealing storylines, familiar locations and

favourite local actors and actresses from television and theatre. Some of the productions use local expressions with English while a few are entirely in Twi, a predominant local language.

Since after Nkrumah there was no clearly defined national policy on the role of film in the development of Ghana and as such no conscious effort at encouraging the production of particular types of movies, the industry has been under the control of individuals with means of production. Several factors dictate the production of films including sources of funding, market conditions which interpret as what viewers wish to see or what is perceived to bring investments returns. The more popular the movie the better, for the producer needs to succeed in making profits in order to make subsequent movies. Content, subject matter, style and all those technical glitches do not matter to majority of these producers who believe filmmaking is an art that requires no specialized training and are in there to make profits.

Style and Technique

Thus these Ghanaian films and videos have over the years composed images of the national culture, with representations of class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, regional and national identity. There is the need to examine how these images have served to represent the nation to itself and to the world.

In verifying the authenticity of these images, we will need to consider the relationship between the cinema, culture and society in Ghana and examine the ways in which these productions have projected different images of *Ghanaianness*.

Filmmaking in Ghana has gone through several generations producing different kinds of films. Older generation filmmakers have focused mainly on issues like lost national identity, erosion of traditional cultural values with roots extending to colonialism and slavery of the African. The *Sankofa* [back to the roots] concept strongly underscored in the older films, projects the idea of rediscovery and re-possession of the African heritage as a solution to the current myriad of problems facing the continent.

The younger generation of filmmakers tends to focus especially on material pre-occupation of the youth as they relate to issues about love, romance and relationships, the hurdles to be cleared in the pursuit of the hearts desire, sometimes involving generational differences in thinking and doing things. Some traditional cultural values are seen as

impediments to the progress of the youth and as such should be either modified or done away with.

The older generation filmmakers have mainly produced on celluloid. Their shooting style tends to be mainly long takes, medium and long shots, and more static pictures. Cameras are mostly tripod mount with stable shots. Settings are predominantly rural and time mostly being the historical past.

On the other hand, the style of the younger filmmakers, whose shooting format video is characterized by fast cuts, juggling with shots of different kinds within a short span. There is the excessive use of close-ups, sometimes very extreme and some unconventional picture framing of the MTV style. The camera fidgets a lot in the sense that it is mostly handheld perhaps due to the short production time schedule that characterizes these video productions. Settings are mainly city scenes with array of latest cars driving in and out of elegant mansions. Characters wear extravagant costumes sometimes advertising their designers and expensive cellular phones feature as common props.

Older Filmmakers

Kwaw Ansah is an older filmmaker with two popular international award-winning films: *Love Brewed in the African Pot* (1980), which won among others the Oumarou Ganda Prize at the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou [FESPACO] in 1981 and *Heritage Africa* (1988) awarded *Etalon Yennenga* at FESPACO in 1989. He is a strong advocate of the Pan-African ideal and passionately talks about it in reference to his works [Ukadike 2002; Pfaff 1995].

To Kwaw Ansah '*Love Brewed in the African Pot* stemmed from basic African problems - class distinctions, interethnic marriages ..., social-standing disparities, which have broken apart many couples and families' [Ukadike 2002:5]. So he highlights these with a story where an elite father wishes to have his educated daughter married to a lawyer of a known middle class family but instead the daughter falls in love with an unknown semi-illiterate auto mechanic of a working class family. The film vividly depicts differences in dressing, eating habits, and place of residence according to class in society.

Conflicting cultural values projected in the girl's father wishing for a church wedding with coats and gowns and not traditional marriage ceremony with cloth and *kaba* under a tree in the open. So when he lost to the debate to the daughter he refuses to attend

the traditional marriage ceremony which he sees as demeaning. The consequences of his actions were tragic as daughter develops mental problem, ends up in a psychiatric home and dies in the end.

What are the concerns of the filmmaker with regards to tradition and culture in the African society? Kwaw Ansah states clearly that the African educated elite's attitude towards his own cultural values has tragic consequences. 'We have been corrupted in such a way that we laugh at our own values' [Ukadike 2002:9]. Western education has its negative effects on the mentality of the African confused about his identity. This notion is strongly held by the filmmaker in conversations with him.ⁱ Thus it runs in his other film as well.

In *Heritage Africa*, Kwaw Ansah follows up on this theme of cultural conflict in a tragic situation of an African elite confused about his identity and alienated from his own birthplace. Bosomfield having anglicized his native name of Bosomefi to sound better in his ears is convinced that his illiterate mother is a dent in his image as the newly appointed District Commissioner in His Majesty's Colonial Government and residing in European reserved quarters. Ironically, it is his mother who tries to elevate him with a sense of family responsibility. He however denies her when she comes for a visit and stashes her in the backyard from the prying eyes of his colleagues who have come to share drinks and reminiscent about 'good old Achimota days'ⁱⁱ. The mother makes the tragic error in judgment by entrusting into the care of his son an important ancestral heritage. Bosomfield pawns the family heirloom a few minutes after it is entrusted in his care, in order to win favours from his colonial boss, the governor. Additionally, he is rude to the people he is to serve and dismisses the petition of railway workers without justification leading to bloody workers riots. Bosomfield looks down upon his own mother tongue because of his overblown ego as a western educated elite occupying a position in His Majesty's colonial administration.

Bosomfield's behaviour ironically sharply contrasts with his elitist ideas: he beats the wife and sacks her together with their only daughter from his official residence over an argument about his dinner. He further seduces an innocent primary school teacher and makes her his mistress.

Ideological differences between Kwaw Ansah and any viewer will lead to problems of comprehension as well as interpretation and acceptability leading to the questioning of the authenticity of the images in his films. To the filmmaker, Bosomfield represents the past

and present. 'What the film attempts to do is to create an awareness of the evil machination of colonialism' [Ukadike 2002:10].

In *Heritage Africa*, Kwaw Ansah draws a strong religious motif by juxtaposing Christian religious faith with traditional belief system in a sequence where little children dozed in church during service but when sent out to take a walk to drive the sleep away, they ended up watching with rapt attention a "fetish dance" happening in the neighbourhood. The aftermath is the subsequent caning of the little boy both by Bosomfield (as father) at home and the authorities at school leading to his death later from tetanus infection.

Another strong religious motif in the film is when a poorly-dressed woman was thrown out of a church filled with men in suits and women in flocks and gowns. Are these authentic images of religious practices in Ghana or an ideological concoction of the filmmaker? To Kwaw Ansah, Africans have been made to believe that whatever their ancestors bequeathed to them is heathen [Ukadike 2002]. Did he try to debunk this notion by portraying Christian religion as barbaric and murderous and of no benefit to the African? This is a very contentious point that places the filmmaker at opposing end with Christians, especially present-day charismatic believers with their extreme uncompromising doctrines. The debate is very subjective depending on the individual's ideological standpoint. No wonder there are many interpretations of this film especially in Christian circles. [see Meyer 1999]

Heritage Africa also makes strong political statements about the negative and perhaps tragic effects of colonialism as well as neo-colonialism on the African with the effects still felt several years after the departure of the colonialists. Kwaw Ansah re-echoes the sentiments of other African filmmakers like Ousmane Sembene in the handling of this political influence sometimes in a very humorous but nonetheless tragic way. The barefooted African school children marching and singing 'pussy-cat on a mission to London' and colonial African policemen ordered to shoot at protesting mine workers in *Heritage Africa* compares favorably with the barefooted African colonial soldiers ordered to shoot their own people in a dispute over rice tributes to the ruling colonial governor in Sembene's *Emitai* (1971).

The scope of this paper would not allow delving into issues that will help us deal with questions such as: who really is Kwaw Ansah and to whom are his films intended?

Are these images authentic enough to *represent* Ghana? What are they meant to achieve anyway? Further reading is therefore recommended.

Younger Filmmakers

Veronica Quarshie is a young professional filmmaker, a graduate from the National Film and Television Institute [NAFTI] in Accra. She is popular for her award-winning movie *A Stab in the Dark* (1999) with its sequel *Ripples* (2000).

Veronica Quarshie in her movies is mainly preoccupied with love relationships at the heart of the youth of Ghana in contemporary period. She highlights this in several ways and at different levels. Young couples struggling to come to terms with hurdles that impede their hearts desire and the consequences of making vital errors in judgment. Veronica abhors love affairs between the old and the young, especially illicit ones involving married men and young ladies in a bid to have fun at the expense of trusted wives. She creates situations where people are trapped in their own misdeeds and pay dearly to undo things in attempts to cover up and save marriages and escape possible public ridicule.

In doing this however, Veronica Quarshie sometimes indulges in stereotyping characters, perhaps to win popular appeal as that makes interpretation of the movies easier for local viewers. We are presented with lecherous pot-bellied businessmen falling for skimpy-skirted young ladies in the game of snatching rich husbands. In the recipe is the trusted housewife oblivious of the amorous nature of the husband but who is shattered in discovering the affair leading to her packing out (or sometimes getting kicked out for interfering) from the matrimonial home.

In *A Stab in the Dark* (1999) Kate brings her friend and classmate Efe home to spend holidays and Efe ends up in an illicit love affair with Kate's father Ansah. This drives a wedge between the two friends as well as leads to the sacking of both Efe and her mother from the matrimonial home. However, this love affair begins to turn around when younger men woo Efe to the anger of Ansah who suffers a heart attack and lands in a hospital bed, cursing himself for indulging in the affair in the first place.

In the sequel *Ripples* (2000), Efe gangs up with two other young ladies to blackmail and extort money from Ansah with threats of violence and destruction. In typical gangster style with neck-breaking speeding motor bike, screeching black-coloured car, dark shades providing mean looks, tight jeans with matching boots to look smart, the trio terrorizes the

Ansah family, waylaying and beating up Kate and holding up her wedding and making crank telephone calls until they received the requested sum, much to the regret of the raging Ansah.

Gender and sexuality feature strongly in Veronica Quarshie's movies. She seems to have reinforced a standard mathematical formula for sexuality in Ghana which looks like: a married businessman or corporate executive plus a beautiful young lady, multiplied by job offer or some other kind of material need, divided by an innocent housewife, equals illicit love affair leading to breaking matrimonial homes. How well could these stories be representative of the present Ghanaian society depends again on the viewers experience as well as convictions. These stories adorn the tabloids everyday but does that make them representations of the nation?

Veronica Quarshie as a young lady might have had personal experiences of such nature as is argued elsewhere as common occurrence in contemporary Ghana. Her concerns might be how society should deal with these issues and the only way for her will be to reflect and diagnose for possible remedy. Her popularity cuts across generations, gender and ethnicity. Her movies are also technically good in terms of plot, direction and editing.

Film enthusiasts

Let me turn attention now to the category of movie producers who without any formal professional training follow their instincts and abilities to tell stories on the screen. Some of these are also very popular on the local front though their movies are replete with technical flaws and as such do not travel beyond the shores of Ghana.

Harry Laud is one such popular untrained movie-maker with several titles to his credit. Perhaps taken the practice of *auteur* seriously and to give him absolute control over the productions in order for them to turn out the way he conceives them, he plays multiple roles as writer, producer, director and the lead actor in the movies. This also contributes to some of the technical flaws in his movies.

The *Yaa Asantewaa* video with its five sequels was very popular when they hit the screens in 2002. Drawing on the popularity of the legendary Asante female warrior for the title of the movie, Harry Laud crafts a story around two female characters in different locations. We have in the city, Abrefi a vicious young lady who maltreats and exploits the blind husband Agyei to satisfy her love exploits with a crook of a boyfriend. We have in the

village, the docile Yaa Asantewaa whose love relationship with Betomu, an heir to a royal stool is the source of friction between her parents and the royal household as the latter opposes the affair.

Issues turn life threatening for Yaa Asantewaa when the father is murdered by gangs engaged by the royal household, forcing her to flee to the city and ending up as a househelp for Agyei the blind husband of Abrefi. The story goes on to juxtapose Abrefi with Yaa Asantewaa in the display of human nature at several levels in their treatment of the blind Agyei.

Typical of local Ghanaian and Nigerian video films, Yaa Asantewaa soon displays magical powers of fixing broken plates, restoring sexual potency of the male servant in the house, culminating in the miraculous cure of Agyei's blindness.

The popularity of this movie lies in the cast of extremely vertically-challenged dwarfish characters as Yaa Asantewaa's parents. There were scenes where a group of six of such diminutive figures [as family members of Yaa Asantewaa's father] in a file goes round chanting slogans translating as 'we are on a marriage mission'. This became a very popular slogan resonating in the country, and used in several contexts.

The story of the movie *Yaa Asantewaa* kept winding and at a point derails from the original issues to several others and situations and dosed with several comic episodes unrelated to situations depicted. Harry Laud can be likened to the kind of cook who enters the kitchen to cook a dish with no recipe in mind and throws ingredients into the pot if they look good to eat and in the end serves a dish hard to classify and perhaps very doubtful for consumption. He capitalizes on names of historical and legendary figures as well as catchy slogans as titles for his movies. He also infuses contemporary events into his movies sometimes very ill-fitting too.

The problem with the film enthusiast turned producer is the notion that the whole process is seen as entrepreneurship and as such anything goes, so long as it brings economic returns. Disregard for values, splashing the screens with all sorts of things which go to reinforce some of the Euro-American stereotyping of Africa under the rapid growth of Pentecostalism and the need to reinforce the teachings of the churches springing up in all corners. [Meyer 2002] The social effects of this movie practice are also extensively discussed. [see Aveh 2010]

However, as stated in the opening paragraphs, film is a very subjective material arising out of several choices made by a filmmaker within certain ideological, social, cultural, economic and even political context. In the absence of any organized force or control mechanism, what gets produced will be difficult to tag with defined labels. There will be problems of representation and authentication so long as decisions are left in the hands of individuals with means of production. Should we perhaps be content with the fact that there is the urgent need for Africans to tell their own stories and not leave it for foreigners, and those who are doing it should be encouraged no matter how they go about it? We could continue the debate in another forum.

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ⁱ I have been privileged to listen to Kwaw Ansah sharing his views on several platforms. Some of these are also expressed in Ukadike F. [2002] *Questioning African Cinema* and Pfaff F. [1995] *Conversation with Ghanaian Filmmaker Kwaw Ansah*.

ⁱⁱ Achimota School is one of the oldest and also used to be an elite secondary school in Ghana, assumed to be for the wards of the rich and high class.