

## THE CONTEXT OF FILM PRODUCTION IN NIGERIA: THE COLONIAL HERITAGE

Onookome Okome

Filmmaking in Nigeria is a nebulous phenomenon. Jonathan Haynes captures this situation vividly when he says that production is artisanal and the output very sporadic. Not a single aspect of the industry is fully defined and the industry itself is hanging in limbo. Some have actually argued that there is no industry to speak of, as productions are few and far between and the means for production grossly inadequate.<sup>1</sup> This is the view held by Hyginus Ekwuazi, whose book on the Nigerian cinema, *Film in Nigeria*, has become a standard text on the subject. In his words, "to make a film in Nigeria is to walk an uncharted path. The Nigerian producer, like his French New Wave counterpart, makes a film in the manner in which one mounts a hold-up."<sup>2</sup>

The problems that beset film production as an industry and as an art are numerous and overwhelm even the most tenacious of Nigerian filmmakers at one point or another. So difficult and unresolvable are these problems that the pioneer of Nigerian cinema, Ola Balogun, whose first film, a documentary entitled *One Nigeria*, was made in 1969, and his last major independent feature production, *Money Power* [Owo l'agba], was made in 1982, threw in the towel after many years of active involvement. Although he helped to inaugurate what is often referred to as Yoruba cinema, Ethnic cinema, and Folkloric cinema in Nigeria, Balogun has gone to Paris to further his film career. As he told this author at the Lagos Film Festival in 1992, he did this out of exasperation.

Film came to Nigeria in the context of colonialism. The film

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the view held by the filmmaker Ola Balogun, a pioneer of the Nigerian cinema. In an interview I had with him in Lagos at the occasion of the first Lagos Film Festival (December, 1992) he re-iterated this position. Since 1981 when he granted Hyginus Ekwuazi an interview based on the state of the film industry, Dr. Balogun has not changed his position. This may partly account for his refusal to enter his film for the Festival Awards. See Hyginus Ekwuazi, "The Context of Film Production in Nigeria," M.A. Thesis (Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Hyginus Ekwuazi, *Film in Nigeria*, Second Edition (Jos: Nigerian Film Corporation, 1991), p. 71.

medium was invented and became a force at about the turn of the twentieth century, when colonialism was at the feverish pitch of its balkanization of territories in Africa. The medium came at an auspicious time, and it helped, in no small measure, to perpetuate colonial ambitions; thus, reducing colonial subjects to colonialism's scope of reference in politics, culture, economics and social systems. In most colonized societies, especially those far-removed from a national cinema culture, the film image resided outside the province of *social reality* because colonial cinema impressed "unreal images." This is one of the deepest lingering legacies of the colonial cinema heritage.

Colonial cinema negatively affected all modes of indigenous cultural production, and in the case of Nigeria, delayed advancement in film production (and in film studies) because its chief motive was the hegemonization of its own colonialist discourse. Film was one of the most significant institutions of this dominance, and even after the end of direct colonial censorship, neo-colonial economic arrangements have maintained this hegemony. In the political sphere, through this agent, colonialism instituted a process of the negation of indigenous political institutions as well as discouraging the possibility of indigenous political discourses. The overall effect is that social change in Nigeria brought about as a result of contact with this medium must be seen from the perspective of colonial dominance. This is unarguable. Local understanding of the film image is ambiguously situated in relation to post-colonial social reality and we must understand how this image operates as social discourse and as political configuration in contemporary Nigerian society.

The first set of film images that the local Nigerian population saw was that of white faces doing outlandish things in a foreign, unfamiliar environment. These filmic images were far-removed from the social reality of the indigenous people. In addition, as an art form, the film medium was not native to these people, and since it was brought to them by the same people who colonized them, this form of art was seen as something outside their social life. This attitude of perceiving the film image as outside of social reality altered the reality of the film image in early colonial film, and served to distance the film world from the real local world, as if what happened in the film had very little probability of happening outside it. The result is that film reality is considered by the indigenous people as unreal, different and distinct

from life. For this reason, film reality can only be an imagined reality. This attitude has persisted since the colonial era, spelling a far-more dangerous trend for contemporary filmmaking in Nigeria. The pidgin phrase, "na only cinema e fit happen," demonstrates the concrete barrier created by contemporary Nigerian people between the film image and their social life. When the Nigerian film industry staggered into existence in the 1970s with the first feature, *Kongi's Harvest*, the audience responded with this ambivalence. Moreover, colonial cinema did nothing to nurture a sophisticated film audience in Nigeria. If anything, colonial cinema tried to mystify cinema operations.

Although the heritage of colonialism has very minimal influence in terms of the content of Nigerian films, colonialism started filmmaking in Nigeria on a faltering path, something that can be noticed in the production, exhibition, and ideological levels of the film image in colonial Nigeria. The Nigerian film industry still suffers from this shortfall, and even the first phase of ethnic cinema in Nigeria carries this burden. Furthermore, the Nigerian film cannot be relevant until it defines its image outside this ambiguity, and this spells a difficult agenda for the Nigerian filmmaker.

The art and technology of film were imported into Africa about the same time as they were taken to America and India, and the Nigerian film audience was born in 1903. As a modern art form imported into this colonized zone, the initial response from the indigenous population was understandably euphoric. The people loved the magic of the moving image. This attitude is aptly demonstrated in *The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria*.<sup>3</sup> According to this source, the first screening took place at the Glover Memorial Hall with the Eleko (Prince of Lagos) and his retinue in attendance. This source has it that "one of the newsreels presented a brief glimpse of the Alake of Abeokuta, a Yoruba King of Western Nigeria."<sup>4</sup> Stanley Jones, one among many independent exhibitors, is reputed to have relieved the "monotony of Lagos life through interesting and innocent entertainment."<sup>5</sup> Interesting as these exhibitions may have been, they began a new phase of indigenous cultural

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Opubor (et al), *The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria* (Lagos and New York: Third Press International, 1979)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

degradation in colonial Lagos, inaugurating a new form of cultural alienation.

As the content of these films was anything but about the life of Lagosians, the euphoria which they initiated was bound to be short-lived. Newspapers of the early period of film exhibition and other written evidence point to the fact that the kinds of films screened were mostly newsreels and documentaries about British life-- politics, culture, education and economics. Before 1903, when the first flickers were exhibited in Lagos, the British government had established a firm presence in Lagos.

Moves to establish control over the content and outlet of entertainment go back to 1912 when the "The Theatre And Public Performance Regulation Ordinance" was established by the British colonial government. This ordinance had, as one of its ten clauses, that it was unlawful to show films at unlicensed premises. What this amounts to is that long before the colonial government went into the production of films in the colonies, it had set up a fine censorship machinery, presumably to guide its imperial interest. This is the point that Ekwuazi makes when he writes that the films exhibited by various European missionaries in Nigeria, especially Lagos, were heavily supplemented with films from the colonial government, all of which "were generally made to condition the audience to civilization."<sup>6</sup> An example of one such film is the notorious *Mr. English at Home*. It is also significant to note that films, including those made by Christian Missions, made outside the production line of the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) were censored before they were allowed screening licences. Since there was no evidence of film production by indigenous filmmakers in Lagos at this time, it is safe to say that most, if not all, of the films exhibited dealt with European life.

After the commencement of World War II, more political films were sent to the colonies. Onyero Mgbejume states this clearly:

The early films shown the African audiences before locally made films were available were those made in Europe, England and United States. These films were sent by the colonial government 'as a benevolent gesture

---

<sup>6</sup> Ekwuazi, *Film in Nigeria*, p. 3.

of tutelage to the colonial people.<sup>7</sup>

As well as the European commercial exhibitors, from the 1900s, European missionary zealots were involved with screening films in Nigeria, especially Lagos and Abeokuta. For the missionaries, the theory was to create a new religious order in the supposedly barren cultural landscape of the "natives," and to propagate the religious doctrine of one God, something quite alien to the indigenous population. Films screened by missionaries for evangelical purposes were not essentially documentary in nature; they were mainly feature films with biblical themes. As early as 1907, the Catholic Fathers screened a film depicting the life of Jesus Christ in their school-room. Immediately after this, there were sharp reactions from the local press, and a columnist for the *Lagos Standard* reviewed this film in the context of its social relevance and berated the response of the growing Lagos elite at the time. The May 15, 1912 edition of the *Lagos Standard* complained that the film's portrayal of Judas as a Blackman and Simon Peter as a light-skinned person quietly insinuated a racist undertone. The anonymous reviewer enjoined the indigenous part of the Church to renounce this film.<sup>8</sup>

Colonialism, of course, did not stop at this point in the perpetuation of a new cultural discourse. In Victorian Lagos, film, as well as the press and other modern institutions, was caught up in the dynamics of simultaneous encouragement and repression by the colonial authorities. Echeruo describes this aspect of Lagos life very well in his book, *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life*.<sup>9</sup> Under the influence of early colonial occupation, the established press blossomed. Echeruo shows the ambivalence of this press, which initially established a certain context alien to the people, but also provided the spur for "native" subversion. From this ambivalence created by the truly African section of the press, knowledge of the "Self" developed. As Echeruo rightly puts it,

<sup>7</sup> Onyero Mgbejume, *Film in Nigeria: Development, Problems and Promise* (Nairobi: African Council on Communication Education, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Onookome Okome, "The Rise of Folkloric Cinema in Nigeria" (PhD Dissertation, University of Ibadan, 1991), p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> See M.J.C. Echeruo, *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life* (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1977)

"[nineteenth] century Lagos was too disoriented to profit from this knowledge."<sup>10</sup> This confusion provided a smoke-screen for the British to redirect the cultural life of Lagos.

The burgeoning local press reported the immense entertainment capacity of native Lagos, a place "where things begin and sometimes end," but these reports and reviews were clouded by the British attitude to indigenous expression. Examples in Echeruo's book buttress this point. So tenuous was the relationship between the native and the Colonial Governor of Lagos at the beginning of the twentieth century that the Governor made an *in extenso* response to native agitations which denounced "allowing people to go on drumming all night over the Island."<sup>11</sup> At this point, it was surprising that the British did not forbid native airs outright.

In 1912, Britain did, however, attempt to regulate the entertainment scene and put it within its cultural hegemony with its first legislation involving the entertainment industry in Lagos (and consequently affecting the Nigerian nation). The "Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance" was a reaction by the British to forestall indigenous cultural initiative.<sup>12</sup> This Ordinance, which includes both film exhibition and distribution, has gone through many changes in post-colonial Nigeria, without ever laying the prerequisite groundwork for a purely national cinema, whose literary equivalent is the "fighting literature, a revolutionary literature and a national literature," called for by Frantz Fanon.<sup>13</sup>

The colonial film policy changed as the political fortunes of Britain began to decline. The policy had been merely designed to regulate private exhibition, but faced with the commencement of the Second World War, the British colonial government suddenly realized that it could not stay outside the exhibition of film much longer. This began a marked shift towards propaganda in the content of films sent to the colony through the special outfit set up by the Empire Marketing Board and later the Crown Film Unit (CFU). The CFU assumed responsibility for the distribution of films in Lagos and its hinterland. In

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of this Ordinance, see Ekuwazi, *Film in Nigeria*, pp. 31-49; Mgbejume, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-61; and Okome, "The Rise of Folkloric Cinema."

<sup>13</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 78-9.

Ekwuazi's words:

The Unit was charged with making films for the colonies with these objectives:

(a) to show/convince the colonies that they and the English had a common enemy in the Germans: to this end, about one quarter of all films made by the CFU were war-related;

(b) to encourage communal development in the colonies (*Village Development* is representative of this group);

(c) to show the outside world the excellent work being done in heathen parts under the *aegis* of the Union Jack.<sup>14</sup>

From the late 1930s, therefore, through the efforts of the CFU, an overtly political aspect of cinema was introduced to the Lagos audience. Film production was primarily a matter handled by the colonial government through its production unit, the CFU, which produced mostly propaganda films of the documentary genre with the explicit ideology of imperial Britain.

As Madubiko Diakite rightly points out, British colonialism discouraged the production of film in the colonies.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it encouraged the importation of films from Britain, and since it formulated the policies of distribution through the CFU and exhibition through its mobile cinema units, it tactfully discouraged all indigenous initiatives.

John Grierson, father of the British documentary, created the Empire Marketing Board about 1927, and put the ideology of colonial cinema into practice through the production and distribution outlets of the Crown Film Unit (CFU), and its later mutation, the Colonial Film

<sup>14</sup> Ekwuazi, *Film in Nigeria*, p. 2.

Hyginus Ekwuazi and Yakubu Nasidi, *No...Not Hollywood: Essays and Speeches of Brendan Shehu* (Jos: National Film Corporation, 1992)

<sup>15</sup> See Madubiko Diakite, *Film Culture and the Black Filmmaker: A Study of Functional Relationships and Parallel Developments* (New York: Arno Press, 1979)

Unit. For Grierson, the role of film in the propagation of British imperialism in British West Africa was clear:

Cinema [is] neither an art nor an entertainment, it is a form of publication and may be published in a hundred different ways for a hundred different audiences...[it] is the most important field of propaganda.<sup>16</sup>

Grierson started one of the most pernicious systems of film appreciation in the British colonies. He left a legacy of encouraging the documentary mode of filmmaking, and established film technology within the direct operation of the empire. In a way, the relationship between Grierson and the colonial class in British West African territories was ambiguous. Although the colonial regime did not encourage the colonial class to take part in the actual production of film, for fear that some stray anti-colonial slant might emerge, it encouraged individual European filmmakers and exhibitors who displayed the same ideological posture that the British Empire wished to sell to the colonized.

As is the case with most colonies, a case well demonstrated in Roy Armes' *Third World Filmmaking and the West*, this form of colonial government was designed for one purpose, "the orderly and efficient extraction of wealth and surplus from the indigenous population."<sup>17</sup> To this end, the colonial state controlled the economic forces of the society to an extent unknown in the west. A second characteristic that Armes very aptly articulates is that because the colonial state imposed political direction on the "natives," it did not reflect the balance-of-power inherent in the political constitution of the indigenous people. Subversion of the power structures of colonial people became a primary means of power-acquisition in such societies, and this posed a threat to the forward movement of colonial subjects. In the bid to extract the wealth of colonial people, the colonial state first had to destroy the political structure, either by fragmentalizing the society through persuasive means, or by sheer force of power. The film

<sup>16</sup> Richard MacCann, *The People's Film: A History of U.S. Motion Pictures* (Hastings House Publishers, 1973), p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Roy Armes, *Third World Filmmaking and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 14.

medium provided one means through which British colonialism articulated the need for, and the actual dislocation of social systems and cultural values in Nigeria.<sup>18</sup>

Not only was the content of colonial films anti-native, glorifying European middle-class etiquette, but quite often the screening procedures were disorientingly patronizing. The examples of W. Sellers and Van Beaver are noteworthy.<sup>19</sup> Beginning from a premise which situated the operations of film's significance above the intelligence of the natives, Sellers, a product of colonial ideology and a strong proponent of this ideology, describes the itinerary of his mobile cinema unit in Northern Nigeria. Note that, of course, the idea of the mobile cinema unit was, in itself, one of the means of propagation of imperial ideology based on the posture of a superior culture.

Backed by his colonialist paternalism, Sellers writes in one of his articles about the direct experience of his mobile cinema tours:

Film demonstrations are not sufficient in themselves. They should be preceded by preparatory work carried out during the day. A good procedure is to arrange for a meeting around 10 a.m. under the chairmanship of the Administrative Officer... Every effort should be made to ensure that influential people who attend the preliminary meetings clearly understood the reason for the visit.<sup>20</sup>

As for the content and duration of a typical cinema screening, Sellers says: "[i]n arranging a programme, careful attention should be given to the balance between films and talks. The talks should be short and crisp; they should be straight to the point and devoid of padding."<sup>21</sup> He

<sup>18</sup> One of the primary tactics that colonial Britain employed to get these films to reach the people living in the predominantly rural areas was the mobile cinema van "a van, a 16mm projector, a reel of 16 mm film and a collapsible screen" was all that was needed. Growing up in the 1960s, I was witness to the crowd-pulling presence of these vans, only this time they were no longer selling to the local audience the purity of English life; they were now part of a heritage which assumed a new function of selling drugs. I remember vividly how they used to scuttle through the impassable roads of my little town, Sapele. The vans announced their arrival and advertised films billed for screening. It was for us, always a time for joy.

<sup>19</sup> See W. Sellers, "Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa," *The Colonial Review* (1954) and Van Beaver, "The Cinema in Belgian Congo," *The Colonial Review* (1959), p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> Sellers, op cit. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

then outlines how time and subject should be dispensed during these screenings:

The following outline of a programme is given as a guide: (1) Music, 4 minutes; (2) Introduction talk, 3 minutes; (3) Film, 8 minutes; (4) Talk, 4 minutes; (5) Film, 20 minutes; (6) Talk by influential local people, 5 minutes; (7) Film, 15 minutes; (8) Talk, 4 minutes; (9) Short entertainment film, 8 minutes; (10) "God Save the Queen," 1 minute.<sup>22</sup>

The frequent interruption of the screenings and the inserted talks demonstrate two fundamental colonialist preconceptions about Africans. First, the narrative specificity of the film medium is beyond the intelligence of the native. Second, the native is incapable of taking in a great amount of detail at a given time. Manthia Diawara describes this as "paternalistic and racist."<sup>23</sup> The result he aptly sums up this way:

Colonial governments, missionaries, and anthropologists thus tried to give Africans a *different cinematic heritage than the mainstream films of Europe and the United States of America* (emphasis mine). The British opened the way in 1935 with the creation of the Bantu Educational Cinematic Experiment.<sup>24</sup> This was proposed by the colonial office of the British Film Institute and financed by such interest groups such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Roan Antelope Copper Mines, the Rholkana Corporation, and the Mfulur Copper Mines, Ltd.<sup>25</sup>

However, this "cinematic heritage" proved to be ambivalent in

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> A film school was established at Accra, Ghana, in the late 40s to train prospective West African filmmakers. Sam Aryetey, who later became head of the Ghana Film Corporation in 1969, was trained here. These structures were conceived to further enhance the political and economic interests of the colonial Government.

<sup>25</sup> Diawara, *op cit.*, p. 1.

its operation. By far the most important ambivalence was the establishment of the "unreality" of the cinematic image in the minds of Nigerians. The cinematic image became something exclusive to itself, situated outside the actual day-to-day existence of the people. This has continued as the audience has been subjected for the last eighty years to a barrage of third-rate European, American, and lately cheap Asian films.

One effect is that the audience may identify, in films, with those who are their enemies in life. As a child, the Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima was always apprehensive whenever Africans sneaked up behind Tarzan and would try "to warn him [Tarzan] that they were coming."<sup>26</sup> I felt inclined to adopt the perspective of the cowboys that mobile vans brought to my little town. The consequence of this empathic alliance, however, may be different in the two examples. In my case, the film image became larger than life in the sense that it was outside the province of my social reality. This loosened the effect of the ideological identification. The "unreality" of the images brought by these ubiquitous vans was made more remote by the presence of the *compere* who had mastered the art of interpreting actions within the discourse. The *compere*, who always accompanied the projection crew, held a place like the colonial village catechist and the school teacher combined. As a catechist, he alone knew the secrets of the white man's knowledge, and as a school teacher, he alone had the key to the European form of education and civilization. For this reason, he was the only one who interpreted the *other* world-- the European world. He recognized the enormity of his powers in this direction and fully utilized it. Like the Japanese *benshi*, long after the sound film was introduced, this *compere*, locally referred to as the *interpreter* after the court clerks of the colonial government, was visible in cinema activities up till the late 70s.

Colonial cinema vans brought films about white people, European films in general, and American slapsticks, especially of the Charlie Chaplin kind. Soon after the collapse of effective colonial occupation, the vans and the structure of the itinerary that colonialism had instituted was converted and fully utilized by the growing multi-national concerns, mainly manufacturers in the drug, clothing and

---

<sup>26</sup> Paul Willamen, "Interview with Haile Gerima," *Framework* nos. 7-8 (1978): 32.

household fittings industries. To expand the local base of their market, they employed these vans to move into the interior. Fitted with a cineprojector and a *compere*, these vans announced their presence in the village square, town hall or a near-by school play field. As late as the 70s, these peddler's vans were still visible along the dirty, potted roads of my small town. This was a legacy left by British colonialism.

The films brought by these mercantilist vans to my town were different from those that had been brought in when actual and physical colonialism controlled the itinerary of the vans. Colonialism screened films that displayed an ideological coherence with its objectives in the colonies. In the mercantilist era, the content and the form changed radically. The operators were no longer worried about the right ideological film to screen to the local population; they were now interested in screening films that would assure maximum attendance at the open-air exhibitions. For this reason, long, violent, passionate romance and gangster films became very popular with these exhibitors.

This explains why in the poor part of my town, the careful observer of the lazy life that rolls by there would not fail to hear "toughies" screaming "guy-names" such as: "John Wayne," "Texas," "Django," "Nevajojo," and many more.<sup>27</sup> So pervasive was the influence of film on the local people that names, modes of dress, and general physical comportment approximated heroic deeds and actions of imported movies. My earlier study of the relationship between this alien cinema and indigenous market literature makes the point that:

---

<sup>27</sup> "Guy-names" were street-names, considered among the people of this town to belong only to the ill-bred. The "ill-bred" considered themselves as "toughians," that is tough children who have weathered the tough economic and social climate. The "toughians" are the street urchins, really tough, tough talking, adventurous as the Nevajojo or any other screen hero for that matter. These "toughians" took themselves seriously. In fact, one of them actually saved enough money to buy a locally made short-gun which he used to threaten people at the entrance of the only Cinema Hall of the town, Olympia. So menacing did this "toughian" become that a detachment of the police was recruited from the near-by Police Headquarters to take care of the precarious situation. This "toughian" called Lucky Lucky became lord unto himself, the new Sheriff-in-town. He was eventually gunned down right at the foyer of the Olympia. The scene of this encounter was like that found in the typical Western or gangster film. For a long time, this was the talk of the town. To this day the flotsam and jetsam of society, created by the combined disillusion of slum life and the escapist illusion of European film, is still visible in the streets of many towns in Nigeria. Emmanuel Obiechina's study of characterization and diction in Onitsha Market literature is very instructive in this regard.

Many of the characters in these pamphlets are modelled according to the tough-speaking-no-nonsense characters of the American Wild-West movies. Similarly, the romantic idealism of Euro-American as well as the exotic dances and love sequences of early Indian films are well represented in Nigerian Literature. *Adventure of Four Star* by J.A Okeke Anyichie and *Eddy, The Coal City Boy* by Ogali Ogali are typical of this literary genre with its spurious allusion to western commercial cinema.<sup>28</sup>

These characters are not only limited to popular kinds of literature of the Onitsha Market kind. Wole Soyinka's inclusion of this character range in his plays shows the significance of the influence of the film medium on Nigeria's urban life. In the play, *The Road*, the *touts* (whose habitual is the Aksident Store) show exuberant characteristics found in Western cinema. Say-Tokyo-Kid is a typical example in this array of characters influenced by this popular medium-- the film.

Not only has the content and choice of films exhibited changed in the mercantilist era, the composition of the screening schedule has also changed. While the schedule of the colonial cinema vans in the interior often concluded their screenings with, "God Save The Queen," the mercantilist era emphasized frequent interruptions of exhibitions to peddle manufactured products to the local population. In some difficult instances, these mercantilist exhibitors concluded exhibitions half-way through an interesting movie just to make the local population return for another day of exhibition;<sup>29</sup> where physical colonialism left-off, neo-

<sup>28</sup> Okome, "The Rise of Folkloric Cinema in Nigeria," p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> I remember one such instance which sparked off trouble in the restive audience. It was a western. The large-busted "good girl" walks into the saloon full of "bad guys." An atmosphere of impending disaster looms. But the innocent "good girl," who has come to see the stranger in town (the "good guy"), is innocently oblivious of the explosive situation. Just at this moment the narrative moves to another part of the street where the "good guy," the "actor" as the major actor was referred to in those day is seen asking someone the way to the saloon. The stage was now set for the confrontation we looked forward to, but just before it could take place, the compere, the mighty "interpreter," announced that the show would continue another day. There was an uproar. Somebody shouted in the dark end of the field where the exhibition was held: "na lie, we no go gree" This instance of the use of the film by agents of colonialism in two distinct political epochs in my little town is only one among the many ploys instituted to dominate local people in Nigeria.

colonialism took-off. Local characters who modelled their lives according to these alien film worlds were considered outside "real" local culture.

Political agitation and the consequent announcement of self-rule in 1960 slightly changed the pattern of film in Nigeria. Noticeable changes started appearing in the late 40s, when it became obvious that independence was imminent. In 1947, the Film Unit was established to take over from the Colonial Film Unit. Originally conceived of as a Public Relations Section of the Marketing and Publicity Department of the Federal Government of Nigeria, its functions were to explore the country's resources, and to enhance national growth.<sup>30</sup> However, this Unit did not make any appreciable in-roads towards creating an indigenous cinema; rather, "the effort of the Unit during its early period centered mainly on the exhibition of colonial films."<sup>31</sup> Not long after, this Unit was sucked into the newly created Federal Ministry of Information, with the sole responsibility of producing newsreels and documentaries for mobile cinema units, public cinemas, and television.

Since Independence, government policy has failed to alter significantly this cinematic heritage of colonialism. The 1963 amendment to the 1912 Ordinance falls short of its purpose. The Bayo Oduneye Review Panel (1985), set up by the Buhari-Idiagbon Junta to review the existing Cinematographic Act, was never fully implemented, and the Indigenization Decree promulgated to promote an indigenous industry by driving out foreign distributors was subverted, a result of the "Nigerian factor," as some put it. The sum of these half-hearted attempts to reorder cinema policy in independent Nigeria has been the entrenchment of a cinematic heritage that is as ambiguously disposed as the intellectual society. Planted in its core is the seed of dissent. The 1992 Jos Agenda (a forum inaugurated to revisit a comprehensive film policy) and the Lagos Film Festival of that year merely restated these crucial problems.

Clearly, a consciously articulated and meticulously implemented policy should have dealt with the colonial hangover. Indeed many aspects of our cultural life have overcome this contact. Oral literary forms remain largely unaffected. Written literature in English is thriving

---

<sup>30</sup> Mgbejume, *op cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

on the application of the techniques and forms of the oral heritage. In theory, therefore, the ability and ease with which these other aspects of our cultural life have withstood the influence of the colonial contact provide strong evidence which film scholars and critics need to look at closely.

In the case of film, however, the highly technological and capital-intensive character of production makes it more difficult to reclaim national cultural autonomy. Film is an industry, in a way that literature or even music are not, and as such, it has to contend with the global economic framework of late capitalism. The pernicious function of this contact is encountered squarely in the extension of capitalism to the non-European world.

Roy Armes has shown that European cinema moved very early to organize itself on a scale that would be competitive, and indeed dominant, in world trade.

As a product of Western capitalism, the cinema has passed through three broad stages of development as far as the organization of its production is concerned. It emerged in Europe in the 1890s, at a time of small-scale industry. In France, for example, where film was first industrialized and given a world role, Alfred Cobban notes that out of 1,100,000 workshops, 1,000,000 had fewer than 5 employees and only 600 employed over 500. During this period competitive capitalism was at its height, and early film companies fought strenuously to control local and international markets, for despite its modest artisanal beginnings, the cinema saw itself immediately in relation to world market.<sup>32</sup>

Lacking the resources to independently support the mass medium of film, Nigeria continued to rely solely on imports from Europe and America long after the nominal disengagement of the British presence. The United States, whose domination of world film distribution began after the First World War is, according to Harry Macdoff, a fine example of "imperialism without colonies." In 1945,

---

<sup>32</sup> Armes, *op cit.*, p. 36.

the MPPDA was renamed the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and its foreign department was named the Motion Picture Export of America (MPEA). AMPECA, the Anglophone African affiliate of the MPAA was set up in 1961, one year after the official disengagement of the British from Nigeria's political and cultural life.

For lack of a very aggressive pattern of distribution in a changing world information order, the British pull-out created a vacuum; AMPECA filled this vacuum. The "biggest of foreign concerns is the American Motion Picture Corporation in Africa which represented and served as a distribution pool for nine of the United States' largest distribution networks."<sup>33</sup> This organ has determined what Nigerians see on the large screen as well as on television. The only challenges to this conglomerate in the distribution of films in Nigeria are the scattered and proliferated concerns of Lebanese entrepreneurs.

Forced into action by this unhealthy situation, the Federal Government of Nigeria put in place the National Film Distribution Company (NFDC) in 1979, ostensibly to "take over from AMPECA, thereby inheriting some films, in the hope that the NFDC would benefit from the huge profit AMPECA makes given its monopoly in film distribution."<sup>34</sup> Decree No. 61 of 1979 establishing the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) was also published in order to stem the tide of this one-sided flow of information. Critics doubt the significance of these indigenous bodies in the distribution and exhibition of films in Nigeria. To put it boldly, these decrees have failed to meet target objectives. Furthermore, without a well-planned exhibition network and cinema theatre ownership pattern, it is doubtful what the Government can really do in this regard. Film houses, mostly situated in the urban areas, especially in the southern part of the country, a geographical location which Hyginus Ekwuazi aptly describes "as the vibrant theatre zone," are in the hands of private individuals and firms. Government has little or no control whatsoever over their operations.

Onyero Mgbajume singles out the ironic instance of "[t]he absence of indigenous film distribution channels for the distribution of Nigerian films to the Nigerian market that has militated against the growth of the film industry in Nigeria."<sup>35</sup> In his reckoning, the National

<sup>33</sup> Hyginus Ekwuazi and Yakubu Nasidi, *No... Not Hollywood...*, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Mgbajume, *op cit.*, p. 98.

Theatre, the only Government outlet for exhibition, in the year 1982 screened a total of 65 films, only three of which were indigenous films-- Ola Balogun's *Money Power* [Owo l'agba], Eddy Ugbomah's *Boulous 80* and Raba Sala's *Orun Mooru*. This situation has changed with an influx of Yoruba films and videos into the exhibition chain at the National Theatre. Furthermore, it is significant to point out that the films of Ola Balogun and Baba Sala grossed more than any of the foreign films screened by the NFDC. What this goes to show is that either the NFDC does not take itself and the indigenization decree seriously, or it exists simply to make gains and not to protect the integrity of the indigenous industry at this teething period.<sup>36</sup>

Nigerian cinema is not yet an industry. Industrial organization implies specialization of labor; it is said that Hollywood-style film production has more than 200 different specialized tasks. In the artisanal arrangement of the industry in Nigeria, specialization is lacking, and the basic technological structure is not in place. For more than two decades, the Government has used every possible means to talk about setting up a film laboratory. The first attempt in 1985 in Lagos was a fiasco. The Federal Film Unit has:

an adequate black and white processing and printing laboratory, a four track dubbing suite, a negative cutting room, three cutting rooms well equipped with Acmade products, and later, Steenbeck editing upright benches and large studio with rostrum camera.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> The question one is likely to be asked is if these indigenous films grossed so much, why aren't they often put into the official exhibition circuit? The answer is an open secret in the Nigerian film industry. Filmmakers say that arbitrary entertainment tax laws leave little or nothing from gate-takings. In addition, there is the high-handedness of the officials of Government, and discriminating entertainment tax rates in the states of the federation. In some states, (the) entertainment tax could be as high as 60%, while in others the rate vary between 45% - 56%. See Afolabi Adesanyan's *The Nigerian Film/Television Index*. See also my interview with Moses Olaiya ("Baba Sala on Magical Films," *Media Review*. Lagos, July, 1992). This situation has created a peculiar problem for the indigenous film producer-director. He/She needs to take his/her film to the people and may screen it anywhere there is enough space for the audience and his/her projection crew. In this respect, specialization in the industry is not encouraged. The producer-director is also the distributor, exhibitor and producer.

<sup>37</sup> Adegboyega Arulogun, "A Look into the Conditions for the Development of a Viable Film Industry in Nigeria," *Operative Principles of the Film Industry Towards a Film Policy for Nigeria* (Jos: National Film Corporation, 1992), p. 82.

and is probably the first in Anglophone Africa (with the possible exception of Ghana). The infrastructure, however, is becoming increasingly inadequate and the man-power ever depleting. Set up by British and Canadian technicians, the remaining staff are ill-trained and cannot adequately man the equipment. Arulogun rightly points out:

[e]ach regional Film Unit located in the Ministries of Information or the Division of Information of the Ministries of Home Affairs, had its small outfit. Like the Federal Film Unit in Lagos, they also had their apron strings tied to the Overseas Film and Television Centre in London.<sup>38</sup>

During the Obasanjo Regime, a color laboratory to process 16 mm color negatives was planned for Port Harcourt. This attempt also ended in failure.

With the establishment of the Nigerian Film Corporation, a ray of hope appeared on the horizon for the establishment of a viable laboratory. Although the media blitz has it that this laboratory, established in the near-temperate atmosphere of Jos after "due considerations," is capable of processing film from rushes to the final print, some filmmakers think this is a hoax. There are a large number of of doubts concerning the laboratory's commercial viability. What is certain at the moment is the fact that a color laboratory exists in Jos.

According to Baba Sala, the producer/ actor/ exhibitor of *Orun Mooru*, *Mosebolatan*, *Are Agba Aye*, *Obe Gbona*, and *Agba Man*, who was commenting on the current situation of the laboratory at the Jos conference in 1992 that was convened to draft a comprehensive film policy:

there are problems with every filmmaker in this country: lack of film laboratory, film stock; we have to go abroad to finish production in all cases and as you know, foreign exchange is going higher and higher every day... so the main problem is that of finance and acute lack of

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

technical support.<sup>39</sup>

This position is also echoed by the young and dynamic filmmaker from the North, Sadiq Tafawa Balewa: "I have often stressed, we need practical solutions to the problems of filmmaking in Nigeria. Less of talk. More of practice in the areas of financing, sourcing equipment and so-on."<sup>40</sup> The opinions expressed here must not be taken at their face value, as there has been a long-drawn battle between a section of Nigerian filmmakers and the administrators of the NFC. The fact is that the film laboratory exists.

Little wonder, therefore, that in the history of the feature film in Nigeria, only a handful of films have been made in the 35mm gauge. Filmmakers have concentrated on the 16mm gauge and lately are working with optical reversal films and video. The few films made in 35mm were done in the 70s and early 80s, when the Naira was still strong. These films are: *Kongi's Harvest* (1970), *Bullfrog in the Sun* (1971), *Dinner with the Devil* (1975), *Ajani Ogun* (16mm blown up to 35mm), *Count Down at Kusini* (1976), *Ija Ominiara* (1977), *Bisi, Daughter of the River* (1977), *Shehu Umar* (1976), *Black Goddess* (1988), *Kanta of Kebbi* (1978), *Jaiyesinmi* (1980), *Cry Freedom* (1981), *Orun Mooru* (1982), *Aropin' Tenia* (1982) and *Money Power [Owo l'agba]* (1982). Within this period, 1962-1990, about 120 feature films were made, many of which are in 16mm or on reversal stock, an average of three feature films every year.

The pioneers of the faltering Nigerian film industry are: Ola Balogun, Sanya Dosunmu, Jab Adu, Francis Oladele and Eddy Ugbomah; they founded the Nigerian film of English expression. Ola Balogun bridges this group with the Yoruba cinema. He started ethnic filmmaking when he collaborated with Ade Love, a member of the Popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre, to make the film *Ajani Ogun*.

The first generation of Nigerian filmmakers, who had the privileged but difficult position of pioneers, did not do much to show the direction of a new national cinema, even though the financial conditions were more favorable then than they are now. There were, and still are, two essential tasks. One is to master the technical and

<sup>39</sup> Onokome Okome, "Baba Sala on Magical Film," *Media Review* (July 1992): 24.

<sup>40</sup> Onokome Okome, "Troubles of a Young Filmmaker," *Media Review* (July 1992): 26.

aesthetic aspects of film in order to express, in that medium, the nation's notion of collective existence. The other is to establish film as a viable industry. In the so called "Third World," this is not possible without an active and supportive government policy, on the other hand, the project cannot be left to the state alone. The relationship between filmmakers, who (like other artists) have the responsibility to maintain an independent political conscience and voice, and the government, which must be supportive but not meddling, has proven to be awkward in many an African country. Finally, it is the responsibility of those in the private sphere, and this includes investors as well as filmmakers, to have a keen sense of the uses of film in a society and of its role in conveying the people's vision, especially when the attitude of the government is deviant.

What immediately confronts the Nigerian film industry is a crippling inability to produce quality films that meet international standards. It cannot yet compete with international films. With no efficient distribution system, it cannot even fight the influx of foreign films at home. With no clearly-defined policy, and without decent and adequately furnished film houses, it cannot distribute the small body of films that it has managed to produce. But as we have pointed out, a national cinema, like a national economy, must be able to define itself. Ladi Ladebo makes this point. To quote him at some length:

There is no doubt that we can dictate new movie taste for our population if we pay a great deal of attention to our technical execution, such as sound, speech effects and photography. It is natural to expect that Nigerians like other people around the world would respond positively to seeing their stories being told in movies, and therefore, patronize the cinema in large enough numbers to make it worthwhile. But the product must be good and comparable in quality...<sup>41</sup>

The evidence available shows that the English cinema pioneered by Ola Balogun, Halilu Adam, Sanya Dosunmu, Eddy Ugbomah,

---

<sup>41</sup>Ladi Ladebo, "Film Production and Content: The Nigerian Experience," *Operative Principles of the Film Industry: Towards a Film Policy for Nigeria*, p.157.

Francis Oladele and the others cannot be said to fulfil this yearning. Ethnic cinema, which is predominantly Yoruba folk cinema, shows the potential of doing so. The argument for a national cinema is one which is based on the potentials of the medium in a plural political set-up and on the theory that the emergence of a national cinema is capable of creating and directing national goals and aspirations. Ladi Ladebo contends that people will patronize this cinema because it arouses in them a national sense of belonging, a common spirit of being, a common aspiration. To achieve this, the operation of this kind of cinema must be reciprocal; thus cinema operation must be founded in recognizable social and cultural facts. It must, as we have already emphasized, problematize national situations, and offer possible solutions, however veiled the solution may be. Ladebo's major point, which emphasizes quality of local films as the paramount factor for audience acceptance is well taken. But the argument must find a different post; acceptance of the technical finish of the film is not tantamount to the acceptance of what the film sells or the total identification of audience with the film image itself. A national cinema may necessarily strive to make up quality in order to justify its existence as an art form, but it does not necessarily have to be a technically perfect work of art. To make this an important criterion is to overlook the peculiar cultural, social and economic situations of the industry at different times and in different nations.

The English language films in Nigeria have not done well with audiences; the new Yoruba ethnic films have. Reasons for the relative failure of these English films have to do with their insensitivity to the cultural needs of the potential audience. Although early Nigerian films are technically superior to the later Yoruba films, the former show little involvement in the people's lives. These films could not create their audiences as did Yoruba ethnic films in the 70s, for the reason that they lacked a recognizable social base. Ethnic cinema is solidly rooted in society. With a recognizable theatre tradition and the application of an indigenous language, their popularity is overwhelming. And because this cinema practice responds to the yearnings of the people, its growth in the last ten years has been phenomenal. The pioneers of English cinema who aimed at creating a national cinema by replacing white faces with black ones soon realized the futility of their venture. The hope of a truly national cinema lies with Ethnic cinema.