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CONFRONTING NOLLYWOOD'S HEGEMONY IN GHANA [©]

A Historical Perspective of Akan Video Movies in Ghana

REBECCA OHENE-ASAH

ABSTRACT: The literature on Ghana's cinema practices have focused primarily on the English-language film industry centralized in the capital, Accra. The last two decades, however, witnessed a significant rise in Akan-language videos originating largely from Kumasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The number of movies produced, and the audience reception, resulted in a decline in circulation of the Accra English-language movies as well as those from Nollywood, which dominated the African film spectrum. Despite these successes, the Akan video industry is largely under-studied. This article relies on observations and interviews with practitioners within the Kumasi film production enclave to suggest that the adoption of indigenous languages for film is consequential to the break in former Nollywood film dominance in Ghana. I examine key historical accounts and the nature of the Akan video film industry as a countermovement to the status quo as well as a cultural resistance strategy that successfully challenged the Nollywood hegemony, which stretched throughout the continent and beyond.

KEYWORDS: Akan language videos, Nollywood, Ghana Akan films

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Introduction

A common occurrence on global video streaming platforms is the group categorization of video movies from Ghana and other West African countries as simply Nollywood films. According to Krings, Matthias and Okome (2013), the transnational visibility of Nollywood films attests to the Nigerian movie industry's dominance on the African continent and in black African communities around the world (Krings, Matthias and Okome 2013, 1–22).

Ghana and Nigeria's cinematic bond dates back to the colonial era, when the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) produced instructional films for distribution in the two colonies, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria (Rice 2011, 135–53). The relationship between Ghana and Nigeria was again enforced when the first six indigenous film trainees on the continent were selected for training in the Gold Coast in 1948. The three Gold Coast trainees and three Nigerians were later drafted into their respective colonial film units (Hesse 1995, 6–9).¹ Regardless of the similarity in film development history, filmmaking in Ghana and Nigeria has since taken distinct trajectories. By 2009, a UNESCO survey ranked Nollywood as the second largest film industry worldwide after the Indian Bollywood, with an influence stretching beyond the subregion (Jedlowski 2013, 25–54).

In this article, I rely on observation and interview accounts of key participants operating within the Akan-language video movement to suggest that breaking the Nollywood dominance in Ghana was contingent on the personal agency of Ghanaian filmmakers, who employed unique cultural elements such as language and narratives that highlight traditions and heritages relevant to Ghanaian audiences. The article's objectives are to spotlight the historical development of Nollywood's dominance in Ghana and to demonstrate how individual agency on the part of local stakeholders contributed to a significant reduction in Nollywood's influence, as a foreground to highlighting the unique identifiers of the Akan-language film industry in Ghana. I present a brief history of Nollywood's dominance from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, where I situate this disconnect. The contributions of individuals to this shift, and how it resulted in the rise of the most populous cinema movement yet in Ghana—the Akan video industry—will precede some concluding thoughts.

1. The trainees were R. O. Fenuku, Sam Aryeetey, and Bob Okanta of the Gold Coast, and R. F. Otigba, F. Fajemeson, and Mallam Auna of Nigeria.

Brief History

Video production in Ghana emerged in the 1980s out of economic limitations presented by celluloid film formats. Video technology's affordability provided the best opportunity for mostly self-taught enthusiasts to express themselves within themes centered on the dichotomy between modernity and traditions, intertwined with explorations of religious and socio-cultural class systems within Ghanaian society (Meyer 2015, 39–80). Proponents operated a thriving business largely from Accra's Opera Square and Kantamanto Cassette Lane, where merchants and buyers traded in videotapes, in VCD and DVD formats, for distribution in different parts of the country for public exhibitions in open spaces and video parlors, and for private home use.

Regardless, by the beginning of the new millennium, Nollywood's extraordinary volume of production and its marketing strategies had overtaken other film and video industries in the subregion, with Accra becoming a distribution center for Nollywood movies. Nollywood's influence was also felt in competing labels for video production centers in major African countries including Ghana's "Ghallywood and Kumawood," Kenya's "Riverwood," and Tanzania's "Bongowood" (Musa 2019, ix–x). Nollywood's influence in Ghana can be traced to the mid-1990s, when a deficit in video film production created a vacuum. Economic challenges necessitated the divestiture of the state-owned Ghana Films Industry Corporation which had hitherto supported video producers with equipment and facilities on a hire-purchase basis. Cooperative treaties among West African states also aided the free movement of goods and people within the sub-region. With a population of over 200 million people, Nigeria was itself a huge market, which contributed to its continental presence (Haynes 2016, 5).

In Ghana, Nollywood's impact was colossal as Ghanaian audiences found the narratives and pidgin English language used attractive. Nigerian movies incorporated more spectacle, including glorified displays of violence and gangster life. Aveh (2010) suggests that the Nigerian popular genre presented significant negative influences on Ghana's collective moral psyche, unlike Ghanaian movies which were more simplistic in narrative content and style (Aveh 2010, 130). The flood of both legal and pirated Nollywood videos into Ghana was further promoted through the programming activities of Metro Television which was the first private television network in Ghana established in 1997. By 2002, when Metro TV had a deficit in local entertainment content, it turned to Nollywood for content. By becoming a hub for Nollywood videos in Ghana, Metro TV drew large viewership from the Ghanaian television audience, creating competition for local filmmakers.

Garritano (2013, 157) suggests that by 2005, competition from Nollywood had succeeded in pushing some producers out of the production business. In response, some Ghanaian video producers turned to the distribution of Nollywood videos, while others pursued co-production, which often involved using artists drawn from both countries and, on occasion, selecting locations in both countries. For instance, 1999's *Asimo*, filmed in Ghana, was a co-production between Ghana's Miracle Films and Nollywood's Igo Motion Pictures and featured Nigerian stars such as Zack Orji, Peter Burnor with their Ghanaian counterparts such as Nat Banini and Grace Nortey. Though such collaborations should have benefited filmmakers from both countries, Nigeria seems to have dominated. Ghanaian artists were often clothed in Nigerian costumes and spoke with Nigerian English accents, making the film product essentially Nigerian. Perhaps, the deeply rooted sociocultural impact of Nollywood in Ghana is what Aveh (2014, 109–122) described as the “Nigerianization” of Ghanaian eyes.

Breaking Nollywood's Hegemony

To reverse the situation, some Ghanaian producers devised a strategy of using indigenous languages instead of English, which hitherto was viewed as the legitimate language for film in Ghana (Garritano 2013, 119). Samuel Nyamekye's individual efforts place him as the main initiator of this initiative (Figures 1 and 2). Despite a commercially unsuccessful debut of his English-language movie, *Be Vigilant* (Nyamekye 1998), he succeeded in establishing Kumasi as a movie production hub to rival Accra's production enclave. In 1999, Nyamekye ventured into co-productions with Nigerian producers and employed Nigerian crews such as directors and visual-effect experts in a bid to fuse some Nollywood styles and effects into his movies. This collaboration led to the production of *Lost Hope* (Nyamekye 1999) and *Jewels* (Nyamekye 1999). When these productions proved economically untenable, he began making films in the Akan language in 2002. Although the use of Akan language in film dates back to the colonial days with films such as *Progress in Kojokrom* (Graham 1953), *Mr. Mensah Builds a House* (Graham 1955), and later, *Sika Sunsum* (MacCauley 2000) and *Kanana* (Yirenkyi 1992), Nyamekye's attempt was innovative as it consciously expressed aspects of Ghana's indigenous heritage with which other emerging filmmakers easily identified.

Akan-Language Movies

An underlying element in Akan-language films is the centrality of the language. Although often improvised, some producers claim they often



Figure 1. Samuel Nyamekye. *Photo courtesy of Samuel Nyamekye, 2016.*



Figure 2. Samuel Nyamekye on location. *Photo courtesy of Samuel Nyamekye, 2016.*

scrutinized story structure vis-à-vis language syntax and grammar before production. Most of the filmmakers I interviewed held the view that the use of the Akan language is a means for preserving their language, traditions, and cultures for future generations. In an interview with Kwaku Twumasi, he said, “In my movie *Yaa Asantewaa War*, I insisted that actors rendered their dialogues in the proper Twi language with all the correct delivery of proverbs and language syntax representative of the Asante Twi language (Twumasi 2017).”

Though Asante Twi from Kumasi is the most prevalent dialect, other variations such as Fante, Bono, Akyem and Akuapim Twi are sometimes present.² Some Akan movies may have a combination of Akan and Ghanaian pidgin English which is representative of a fused vernacular spoken by many Akan speakers in Ghana.

Unlike their English-language film counterparts in Accra, Akan movie producers have integrated artists from other media spaces such as Concert Party travelling theater and Akan television drama into the film medium. The reliance on recurrent protagonists such as Santo and Agya Koo, who were Concert Party stars, was partly responsible for the early successes of the Akan video industry. Ghanaian audiences were already familiar with these artists and so it was easy to picture them in movie roles. The growing commercial success of Akan language videos soon attracted producers who used Nyamekye’s work as the benchmark for determining what Akan movies should be. Nyamekye’s movie *Kumasi Yonko* (2002) incorporates Twi and some English and tells a story about friendship, alliances, and betrayal in the Kumasi township. This movie attracted audiences outside the Akan-speaking population because of its relevance to authentic cultures and traditions within Kumasi and its environs. Garritano (2013, 172–173) suggests that, as of 2011, Akan-language videos had overtaken English-language videos both in popularity and quantity. This new dynamic gave Akan-language producers the confidence to operate as a distinctive industry. Nyamekye contends that this change in status quo courted Nigerian distributors’ attention and attempts were made to intervene at the diplomatic levels. He recollects, “Nigerian officials came to Ghana to engage us and our officials to allow the comeback to the status quo of buying and selling rights of Nigerian movies in Ghana or co-productions . . . but this was not the way to go because Twi movies were doing better, and we did not need them (Nyamekye 2017).”

2. These dialects are rooted in the “Kwa” branch of the Niger-Congo language family (Kropp Dakubu 1988, 7).

Though Nollywood's influence on Ghana is incomparable to the impact of Western film culture, Nollywood's presence in a relatively small economy like Ghana, and the threat it poses to the country's sociocultural sovereignty, cannot be ignored. The actions of Akan video proponents have demonstrated a readiness to dismantle all forms of external domination both from within and outside the African continent. By inventing their own genre of film, producers took control of their markets and audience share (Fanon 1963, 315).

Content of Akan Movies

The subject matter and themes of Akan language videos are expressions of everyday Akan culture, laced with lyrical proverbs and innuendos. Even when other genres are explored, they are incorporated with dramatic situations reminiscent of Akan traditions. Stories can be grouped into reality drama, historical epic, and action. Reality drama presents real-life scenarios that may relate to the producers' or form a significant part of the target audiences' cognition and worldview. There is a strong connection between these scenarios and Akan cultural practices such as birth, marriages, burial, chieftaincy, as well as indigenous festival displays. Stories within this category crystallize around a protagonist, whose actions or inactions consider real-life scenarios highlighting the central role of religion on human existence. For instance, Asabea's behaviour in *Asoreba* (Nyamekye 2005) is critiqued because her constant conflict with other members of her community is deemed contrary to the ideals of a church-going elder. Films in this category are similar to what Diawara (1992, 141) refers to as social realist narratives, which depart from the intellectualist tradition of African cinema, yet rely on populist themes relatable to the masses.

The next category of historical epic stories presents popular traditions, legends, myths, and historical events associated with Akan heritage. Films in this category are made with *mise-en-scènes* that highlight traditions and ways of life considered indigenous. An example is the film *Yaa Asantewaa War* (Twumasi 2010) in which the legendary Asante hero Yaa Asantewaa's show of bravery and resistance to colonial rule drives the narrative. The last category of action films includes an ensemble of artists who act as martial artists, body builders, and gang members, some of whom may act in scenes reminiscent of Chinese martial arts and Kung-fu films. An example is the *Gh-Mortal Kombat* (Amidu 2017) series, which are a local rendition of the original *Mortal Kombat* franchise.

Regardless of the story type, one defining quality of Akan-language videos is the repeated use of an identifiable comical star who plays a "jester" role such as Agya Koo playing Old Soldier in *Wo Nyame Som Po Ni* (Nyamekye

2007) where, as a retired soldier, he terrorizes his community amid drama and comedy scenarios. Soundtracks that narrate the entire film are also a constant feature. Another unique feature of the Akan-language films is the symbiotic relationship between the audiences, sellers, distributors, and producers. Story trends are sometimes determined by this chain. Often, retailers carry information and comments about the kinds of storylines and genres that buyers (audiences) would like to see and distributors, in turn, inform the producers, who may be encouraged to produce similar genres. This chain makes the final film a collective vision, which enhances its popularity.

Distribution of Akan Movies

At the height of the Akan video movement (2009–2015), video compact disk VCD and digital video disk DVD formats were the main distribution formats. By 2017, however, some Akan filmmakers had begun exploring conventional exhibition practices, utilizing hotel conference rooms and the few cinema halls, such as Watch and Dine, in Kumasi. Television continues to be a means for distribution, where old films are exchanged for airtime to advertise upcoming videos or other contents. Akan-language films often come with English subtitles. Their distribution, via YouTube and mobile applications such as Kumawood App and 2Ctv, attracts millions of viewers both in Ghana and among Ghanaians living in the diaspora. Garritano's (2013, 173) study found that Akan videos offered audiences living in the diaspora a "virtual experience of home." The industry's unique distribution channels include screenings on travel buses, where passengers are captive audiences (Figure 3).

The Akan video industry's rising curve, however, began to flatten in 2014. This was during a national energy crisis called "*Dumsor*" (unpredictable electricity power service) that affected all spheres of Ghana's economy. The power crises affected the film industry, from production to distribution. *Dumsor* also coincided with the liberalization of the television airwaves, which paved the way for the proliferation of private television channels showcasing programming, predominantly in Akan language. Although these factors affected the commercial potential of movie production in Ghana, the Akan video genre succeeded in establishing a dynamic indigenous film movement that contributed to breaking Nollywood's hegemony in Ghana.



Figure 3. Viewing of videos on a short distance bus (*trotro*). Photo by Rebecca Ohene-Asah, 2018.

Conclusion

As Nigeria's Nollywood continues to thrive as the second largest movie industry in the world, one thing is clear: its tentacles appear to know its boundaries. Whereas a shift from Igbo language to English (Pidgin) was a catalyst for Nollywood's success, the reverse is observed in the Ghanaian case, where a shift from English language as the legitimate film language to an indigenous one led to its becoming a national sensation. Attempts to widen the popularity of Akan videos have included the casting of top Nollywood stars such as Aki and Popor, who have been coached to speak in the Akan language. These actions have reaffirmed the long-standing creative bond between the two countries.

In sum, I have suggested that the work of key Ghanaian producers, such as Samuel Nyamekye, contributed to diminishing Nollywood's presence in Ghana. This article has also highlighted some distinctive characteristics of the Akan-language video industry that has come to be known as Kumawood. It has also demonstrated how Akan-language videos have become a national

favorite over their Accra English counterparts. Regardless of Nollywood's global clout, as far as Ghana is concerned, the Akan video movement has successfully positioned itself as a foundation for developing a truly independent film industry that can represent a post-colonial nation's cinematic movement.

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