

The New Wave in Ghana's Video Film Industry: Exploring the Kumawood Model

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ABSTRACT: *Interest in the video industry in West Africa, particularly with the boom of Nollywood and Ghana's movie industry has surged, with researchers paying attention to this new 'Cinema' of West Africa. Nollywood is currently the third largest film industry in the world, coming after Hollywood and Bollywood, grossing over US\$ 200,000,000 annually. In Ghana, there are two main streams of the video industry- the English (Glamour) and the Akan (Kumawood). The Kumawood films have a devoted following, which more or less places it as pop culture, extending beyond the Akan speaking of Ghana, though it remains unpopular among the middle-class and elite in Ghana. In this vein, this paper explores the Kumawood as an industry. A situation analysis through documentary research and interviews was done on the state of the industry, placing emphasis on the strategies that propel the industry to hold the fourth of the Ghanaian cinema culture, in the wake of the decline of movies in English. Findings of the research situate the success of the Kumawood model to their cultural appeal, their timeliness to national situations, and the mass media.*

KEYWORDS: *Kumawood, video, film, cinema, industry*

I. INTRODUCTION

'Kumawood' is generally used (though unofficially) to refer to video film industry in Kumasi, capital of the Ashanti Region of Ghana, the most populous region of Ghana with a population of 4,780,380

people [7]. The 'Kumawood' movies are principally in the Akan language, the largest spoken language in Ghana, spoken by about 44% of Ghanaians [1]. The origin of the term Kumawood is not too clear, but it draws inspiration from Hollywood, Bollywood, and the Nollywood (names for the American, Indian and Nigerian films in general). However, it is believed to have been coined from the Kumawood Film Festival & Akoben Movie Awards, an annual awards and film festival held in Kumasi. The term 'Kumawood film' generally refers to films produced using the Akan language, regardless of where they were produced in Ghana.

Kumawood films are very popular in Ghana now, with the decline of films produced in the English language, which patrons have tagged 'Glamour', to show contrast to those produced in Kumasi.

The surge of films in the Akan language has created a niche, adopting the production strategies to satisfy the 'film taste' of the masses, which mostly are disconnected from the Glamour.

The rise in the video industry in the mid-1990s in Ghana and Nigeria was treated with disdain by the professionals in the industry [8]. The professionals and the established film institutions during that

period were unhappy with the technical deficiencies of those films, not to mention the superstition-riddled content that had overtaken the market [8]. Even in recent times, the story has not changed much. The Ghanaian and Nigerian film markets are inundated with films by businessmen and untrained personnel who have principally targeted the local market. This has resulted in the local consumption of movies, though it must be added that some of the films are consumed by Ghanaians and Nigerians living outside Africa.

It is worth noting that the large population of Nigeria suffices for its film market. Thus, without a serious international market, the Nigerian film industry still makes enormous impact in world cinema. Dovey quotes a 2009 UNESCO report which places Nollywood ahead of Hollywood, coming second only after Bollywood. Nollywood in 2012 was the second largest employer in Nigeria [5]. In terms of worth, Nollywood, in 2007 and 2008, was estimated to be worth almost between US\$ 150,000,000 and US\$ 200,000,000 [8]. In Ghana, the film industry is worth little compared to Nigeria. With the estimated 100 films produced yearly, it is difficult for Ghana to match up to the size of Nollywood [8].

Production of film in Ghana can be traced to the pre-independence era [15]. Before independence, film production was a preserve of the state, which was run by the Gold Coast Film Unit [15]. After independence, the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) replaced the Gold Coast Film Unit [15].

Meyer recounts that film, at the time, was seen as an avenue for public education, and not for entertainment [15]. Based on this, it became difficult

for film filmmakers who funded their films themselves to generate funds for production [15]. In spite of such difficulties, people who were not trained assumed the mandate to come up with full-length feature films. Such producers used actors who were professional or otherwise, wrote short scripts and used average VHS cameras for their production [15]. This became fruition because of the digitization of film, and how easily accessible digital cameras were, not to mention the ease of digital editing (ibid.). Thus, in 1987, *Zinabu* which was directed by William Akuffo was the first Ghanaian film on VHS [5].

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

Video films have generated a new approach the public interact and creating new experiences with the audience. Video film producers have found, with their new audiences, avenues and practice that suit, but runs contrary to the traditional celluloid filmmaking. The loyal audiences of these video films from Nigeria and Ghana have sustained their businesses making them profitable [16]. Based on the preferences of these audiences, the styles and themes of the productions are fashioned to suit them, and also make the producers develop new distribution networks and techniques of sales and exhibition [13].

The surge of video films had raised many concerns—from themes to production. The debate moved from issues of technical to the narrative quality of the videos. Issues of ideology later found its way into the critique of these films, especially as the audience found a deep-seated inner introspection. At a point, producers and directors who had learnt the trade of

filmmaking were often pitched against formally trained ones.

Unfortunately, most of these arguments, debates and discussions are not published. This is partly because African film scholars have been slow in recognising and acknowledging the video films, and to include video films in their research [6]. The scholars were averse to considering the films an aspect of African filmmaking, and were often treated with a lot of spite, not even with the success of Nigerian films in Nigeria and Ghana.

The late 1990s saw the Nigerian video films flood the Ghanaian market, relegating Ghanaian video-films to the background. Between 2000 and 2008, about ninety per cent of video-films displayed by vendors in Accra were Nigerian movies. The heavy presence of Nollywood video-films in Ghana was also on television. Television stations in Ghana broadcast Nigerian videos frequently. There were times prime television was reserved for Nigerian films. This became so widespread that advertisers had to cash in and advertised or sponsored some of the telecast. Because of this most Ghanaian film, producers went out of business, while others embarked on co-productions with Nigerians making the Ghanaian films produced lose their Ghanaianess. Others simply became distributors of Nigerian videos, as they found it more profitable than producing.

Today, there is a new wave in the video film industry in Ghana- Kumawood, suppressing the dominance of Ghanaian films in English and the Nollywood films marketed and distributed in Ghana. Currently, of the ten movies released in Ghana weekly, seven are from Kumawood.

This paper thus avers that it is about time attention is given to the Kumawood films in academia, as [6] and [8] had argued for early Ghanaian and Nigerian video films.

Therefore, the general objective of this paper seeks to explore the Kumawood Model of filmmaking, by answering the following questions:

- What account for the general popularity of the films in Ghana?
- Do the elements that make the films popular fit into the discourse of cinema?

III. CONCEPT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is situated within the concept of National Cinema. Susan Hayward suggests that a starting point for thinking of national cinemas is the concept of nation, national identity (ies), nationalism and culture. National cinema thus encompasses a cinema or industry that has a national identity [9]. By this, National Cinema provides great insight into the study of emerging film genres, which have assumed some level of national identity. Drawing on the studies of [4] and [10], the study explores how Kumawood films could be placed within the context of this National Cinema.

Crofts mentions the factors which are important for thinking about national cinemas- Production, Distribution and Exhibition, Audience, Discourse, Textuality, National-cultural specificity, the cultural specificity of genres and nation-state cinema 'movements', and the role of the State [4].

Aside Crofts, [10] also proffers certain contexts for the study of national cinemas. Higson is of the view

that national cinemas can be recognised by ascertaining certain features like the business and industrial context of cinema. He also suggests an inquest into how the films are exhibited, consumed and how they influence national culture.

It is thus important that approaches to studying a 'rising movement' like Kumawood be analysed within the context of National Cinema. The industrial context of analysing cinema therefore, has been widely studied and recommended in film studies. Douglass Kellner for example, has argued that cultural products like film need not only be studied based on the text, and the reception that audiences give them alone, but must be immersed in the industrial context within which the films are produced [12].

It is thus, apparent that the industrial strategies that account for the popularity of video films in West Africa, and Ghana for that matter cannot be overlooked [6], [8], and [16].

Olufunmilayo B. Arewa's work, *The Rise of Nollywood Creators, Entrepreneurs and Pirates*, amply catalogues the Nollywood model [2], which Meleiro finds akin to the Ghanaian film industry, structurally and artistically [14].

[2] Traces a mix of strengths and limitations of Nollywood, with the positives including highlighting the cultural identity, commitment to portraying morality, affordability of the products, and accessibility through extensive marketing. However, she laments the quality of production and the high commercialization of the products.

The Conceptual and theoretical framework adopted for this paper is appropriate in assessing and

explaining the Kumawood model. Therefore, the chosen framework is applicable to the findings in helping to explore the model under study.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is used in instances where the variables that are being investigated cannot be quantified easily. Qualitative analysis "is one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings, socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern)" [3]. This study is also exploratory in nature, in that it seeks to provide an initial analysis of a phenomenon [11]—the Kumawood film industry—and lay a foundation for future study.

This study looks to catalogue the industry elements that make Kumawood worth giving attention. This is because these elements can be grouped and used to assess the industry as a whole. The data was gathered using documentary research and observation. This was complemented with semi-structured, open-ended interviews to gather information about the industry. This style of interviewing allowed for a more extensive, in-depth understanding, which suits the explorative nature of this study. Interviewees were from Film Producers Association of Ghana (FIPAG), a film Marketer/ Distributor, Television Promoter, and a Sound track producer.

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the exploration of literature, situational analysis and interviews conducted, the analysis is done with the major objectives of the research in mind.

In addressing the first research question, “What account for the general popularity of the films in Ghana,” it was established that the marketing strategies that Kumawood producers adopt in driving their products to the masses is a major factor, thus tying in into the strategies that Nollywood had ridden on, as established by researchers [2],[6],[8],[16].

These strategies are classified as follows:

A. EPONYMISATION

An eponymous character in film is the character whose name is in its title. In Kumawood, a particular actor (often with a stock name, and sometimes as a stock character) becomes the face of the movie, albeit, if his or her role is minimal. The role of the character is to help sell the movie; the face of the actor does not only grace the jacket of the film, but also bears the title of the movie, or becomes part of it.

Drawing inspiration from Nollywood comics, producers and marketers rely on the popularity of the character and how he or she resonates with the target audience. Nollywood characters like Mr. Ibu and Osufia are classic examples. In Kumawood, names like Agya Koo, Lil Win, Kwaku Manu, Kyeiwaa, Maame Serwaa are eponymous characters that have been used extensively. Examples of such films include *Maame Serwaa Amanehunu*, *Who killed Maame serwaa?*, *Agya Koo Roman Father* , *Agya Koo Carpenter*, *Agya Koo In Prison*, *Kwaku Killer* , *Kwaku Manu Asooden*.

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These leading actors are relegated by the producers when their audience appeal drops, in favour of newer ones. Agya Koo (real name Kofi Adu) used to be the face of Kumawood films. Arguably, the biggest movie star in Kumawood, if not in the country, he appeared in one or two movies per month. On the realm of succession, his popular appeal dropped in favour of Kwaku Manu, who was a protégé of Agya Koo. Kyeiwaa had her own share of reign, and currently Lil Win (real name Kojo Nkansah) is the most sought-after actor in Kumawood.

From the interviewees, it was established that the public easily gets fed up with certain actors because they end up being over used. This was corroborated by the film marketer, but insisted that sometimes, the producers are compelled to use particular actors because it becomes easy to market the films that bear their names. Producers were, also blamed for deliberately ‘killing’ the actors when their popularity soars when they begin to demand more. On the average, such eponymous characters earn between Ghc 9, 000 and GHc15, 000 for the entire production, based on the level of the role and contractual demands.

B. TITLING

The titles of the Kumawood films have also been a major attraction tool that the producers adopt. The film titles, often may not relate to the story in anyway (a major criticism of Kumawood films), but have succeeded in getting national attention.

Apart from the titles, mostly bearing the names of the lead actors, Kumawood producers have also gone very social by picking social or national happenings, and superimposing them on their films. Again, here, the title, as identified, may not have a relation with

the plot, but it does reinforce a 'national' happening. For example, the titles of films like *Atta Mortuary Man*, *Boys Abre*, *Azonto Ghost*, *Gargantuan Woman*, *Mr. Boom*, *Ama Benyiwaa*, were all drawn from social and national discourse. This, the producers claim, help to relive national discourse, thus making the films have currency.

C. MOVIE SOUND TRACK AND TELEVISION SCREENING

The production of sound tracks (musical videos) for Kumawood films was also identified as a major contributor to the popularity of the films. The sound tracks consist of a song, composed purposely for the movie, with scenes of the films, helping to tell the story.

The movie producers invest in producing songs with their videos purposely for television. These sound tracks are given special airtime on television and paid for. The sound tracks cost a minimum of Ghc 1,500 a month depending on the television station, and time and frequency that they are aired.

A movie like *Azonto Ghost* became popular because of the sound track. The audio version of the movie track and the artiste won a nomination in the Ghana Music Awards in 2013.

Television screening of the Kumawood films has also been a major source for their popularity. In as much as, the films are not made for television, the producers have used television to sell their music. The Kumawood films come in several parts because of the extensive storylines, and because the videos are on VCD, they are produced in parts, with some of them stretching to as many as four to five parts.

The producers, thus, give the films to the television stations; the films are screened to draw public attention to the subsequent ones that are yet to be released. The filmmakers, exchange their films for commercials/ promotion of their next productions. The television stations in turn screen the films.

Do the elements that make the films popular fit into the discourse of cinema?

Drawing on the concept of National cinema, proposed by [4], [9] and [11], Kumawood films can be immersed into the concept from various fronts.

D. NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Kumawood films do generally tell the Ghanaian story. The story lines easily resonate with the audiences, compared with some of the movies in English, which have been criticized for telling stories that do not tell the Ghanaian story. The argument is that the setting and costume do not relate to any cultural base in Ghana. For example, *Princess Tyra* produced by Abdul Salam Mumuni (the owner of Venus Films in Ghana) is criticized along this line.

The Kumawood movies tell the everyday life of the Ghanaian, particular in Kumasi. *Kumasi Yonkor*, for example was hailed for depicting the daily struggles of the low income Ghanaian who lives in compound houses.

Aside the story lines, the dovetailing of the stories to current issues of Ghana also help fit Kumawood films into the National Cinema as proposed by Hayward (2000) [9].

E. EXHIBITION AND DISTRIBUTION

Distribution channels for Kumawood films are not that structured; however, the producers have their own strategies to distributing the films. Once the films are edited and ready for the market, the producers give it to the marketers who distribute through retailers for Ghc2.00, who intend sell, the films for Ghc5.00.

[2] Cites affordability of Nollywood products, and their accessibility through extensive marketing as a major strength of the industry. This same model is adopted by Kumawood producers. The films are readily available on the market once the production process ends. Kumawood producers do not premier their films; neither do they show them in the cinemas before they hit the market to be sold, unlike most of the Ghanaian films in English.

Kumawood also has a film festival and awards, the *Kumawood Film Festival & Akoben Movie Award*, instituted by Kumawood Entertainment and Concept Developers, a private limited liability Company based in Kumasi, Ghana. The awards have been in existence since 2011, and it is organized annually in Kumasi.

VI. CONCLUSION

Kumawood films, like any cultural products, as proposed by [12] fit into the context in which they are produced and consumed. In as much as the products from Kumawood, just like critics did for early Ghanaian and Nigerian video films, have been derided by the elite and middle class in Ghana, and is yet to be studied academically, because of the

generally low quality of the production, it is worth giving the necessary attention.

Larkin [13] has maintained that films from Africa have been aliens in their countries of origin. This, however, cannot be said for Kumawood films, which resonates culturally and nationally with Ghanaians.

Ukadike shares the belief that African cinema is charting a new course and that there is the need to understand the cultural and economic benefits that African films offer. For him, video-films provide an unparalleled art form that still makes them commercially viable creating “thriving local industries and market-oriented economies within the media sectors and has rapidly expanded the parameters for defining national film and video cultures and audience tastes” [16].

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