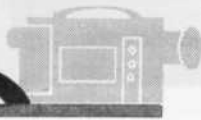




Loud in Lagos

Onookome Okome



HOME videos are

gradually and effectively replacing all contending forms of popular discourse in many African cities. It seems the era of the cheap literatures is gone, replaced by cheap indigenous video productions. These video dramas now form one of the most significant ways in which the city discusses itself, its superficial modernity and its strange attachment to traditional life. In many ways, these dramas construct the city in its own image, sometimes reducing the problem of the city to the pleasure of gazing, the need to feed one's voyeuristic curiosity, but they provide a new and refreshing way to look at the city. This is a medium of the city, created and nurtured in the city for its own benefit. Home video production is itself a direct result of a declining standard in the culture and economics of African city life. It is in a sense a movement out of the purely literary culture. It is a means of discussing tradition and modernity in the city. It is a means through which city dwellers in Africa try to make sense of wretched lives; in other words, it is a

means through which city dwellers convince themselves that life is still worth living. It is the site of the city narrative; its irreconcilable differences and ambiguity. Indigenous home video provides within its narrative options all the sites of social and cultural antagonisms and contestations in a postcolonial, post-civil war, post-oil boom era of the Nigerian society. Above all this, the medium creates a subculture which encourages a distinct but fragile urban culture.

Indigenous video phenomenon is only a recent thing, but the boom seems to have overtaken the whole of the continent. Home video entertainment has grown lately into a flourishing business, catering for a very enviable profit margin in the private sector in the economies of many African countries. All along the streets of Nairobi, and many big cities and towns in Kenya, the casual observers cannot fail to see how pervasive this phenomenon has been. Writing about the Kenyan Film Corporation for instance, Manthai Diawara tells us that

Other functions of the KFC involves the development of a mobile cinema system in the rural areas and video centres on the outskirts of Nairobi... therefore the KFC limits its film production to videotaping urban products for advertisement in rural areas and for television commercials (1992:117)

The proliferation of video technology on the continent is a result of many social and economic factors. Video productions are cheaper to accomplish and easier to put to use in village video viewing centres as well as in the many video shops dotting the cities of African countries. The Kenyan government recognizes this and has taken adequate steps to put this medium into useful purpose to expand its commercial base to the rural areas of the country. Diawara also writes about the situation in Ghana. In his words,

The GFIC has had to deal with video piracy, too, because the shortage of foreign currency in Ghana makes the import of films expensive. Since 1982, video centres have opened up everywhere in the big cities, and the most recent films are shown on video monitors in violation of the copy-right and cinematographic laws in Nigeria (118).

What comes out clear here is a proper recognition of the medium in urban development.

Video and music stalls are everywhere, from mainly the commercial areas of Lagos to side-streets. Home videos are sold in the streets advertised on primetime national television programmes, on radio and only recently a journal solely devoted to video personalities was inaugurated. From the hard, ear-blasting shops, it is not uncommon to see groups of young men and women watching with serious attention on the television screen video dramas of their favourite actors and actresses. Often the stories are based on the urban life. *Onome*, for instance, has the pathetic story of a girl by that name. *Onome's* drama is a typical example of how the devastating city life can lead a young girl from the path of honour and hardwork to that of immorality and criminality. The moral question of this drama is a perennial one which the city foists on its dwellers. In this drama the question is situated around the problem of urban poverty, a result of the unequal distribution of resources in urban life. In *Kosegbe*, the city creates and destroys itself when powerful smugglers connive with corrupt officials of the Customs Department to render the role of this institution ineffective. The lone crusader of social justice suffers in the face of an overwhelming brigand age.

But while interest in indigenous video dramas has risen in the past ten years, this has not dampened the continents' enthusiasm for foreign home video entertainment. Indeed the influence of foreign home video is often apparent in indigenous home video copy of stories with urban setting and the imitation of the plot structure. Besides the many problems which the industry is saddled with Amaka Igwe, herself an actress, tells us that home video producers are mostly interested in two main themes: black magic and the complete imitation of *Oyinbo*.¹ In her opinion, when these videomakers are not concerning themselves with the banal issues of 'black magic, juju, witchcraft, serpents and all that,' they are at the other extreme 'trying to be more *Oyinbo* than the *Oyinbos*... people do not mind the traditional values which are good and beneficial to the society' (1996:29). The foreign influence which Igwe hints at displays the abiding contradictions of urban life in contemporary videoplays in Africa. The city provides a facade. City dwellers revel in the most modern items. From clothing to the most exquisite cars and homes, city people pretend to have imbibed the



**A scene from
the video
film,
'Magnate'**

ways of the West sufficiently enough to pass as Europeans or Americans. Yet when the tough chips of city life are down, the deeper spiritual need is resurrected: the urgency is to reach to the root of traditional spiritual essence. Indigenous home video dramatizes this contradiction, producing mostly dramas of young flashy and upwardly mobile city dwellers who are seemingly rootless, but whose needs reach fulfilment only after a visit to the *dibia* or *babalawo*.

It is not only in the choice of story and the structure of the plot that the influence of foreign videoplays can be seen. Indigenous home video productions also try to replicate the characters of films and videoplays from Europe and the United States. In the streets of Nairobi and Lagos, as in other parts of Africa, especially in English-speaking Africa, youngsters speak and dress like the characters found in indigenous home videoplays who are thinly veiled replicas of characters from foreign films. Since violence is part of the youth

culture which these foreign films engage in, the version found in the cities go strutting about in the street night and day, talking tough and holding up people at gun-point. The evidence of the urban dress code is also one of the characteristics you will not fail to see in these cities. Only recently the BBC correspondent reporting the incessant alarming day-light robberies in Nairobi noted that the heinous robbery of a Nairobi bank is reminiscent of the films of the American wild, wild West. The insinuation is very palpable: these robbers have been watching gangster movies.

In Ghana and Nigeria, consumption of indigenous home video has witnessed a phenomenal rise and this has produced a subculture which has inaugurated a neotraditional culture in a diabolic relationship with the modernity in the cities. In Nigeria, for instance, the post-oil boom era, the 1970s, witnessed huge movement of people from the rural areas to the urban centres in search of jobs. There was the promise of jobs,

opportunities, and the hope for better life. The drift was phenomenal in the 1970s, but the government did not make any preparation for this massive movement of people. The result was *slumification* in most of these cities. Essential social amenities were lacking, housing and recreation inadequate. The consequence was a rise in crime rate. In the face of all this, social activities such as movie attendance dropped drastically.

Meanwhile the mismanagement of the Nigerian economy of the 70s led to a drastic reduction in the power of the cinema industry to support itself. In the 70s the industry strived solely on the personal efforts of very dogged filmmakers. But while it was obvious that the 70s presented problems for these filmmakers, notably Eddy Ughomah, Ola Balogun, and Francis Oladele, the 1980s exacerbated the



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problems. The Naira, the nation's currency, was abysmally devalued and it became practically impossible to make films in the regular celluloid gauges. Filmmakers who were once working with the regular celluloid gauges turned to the video format. Although cheap, it lacked archival value. At lesser cost they assemble a cast, shop for cheap urban stories saturated with dubious beliefs which hardship in the cities have engendered; rush through rehearsals, after which a large number of the original print is duplicated. The result was often shoddy. In the early days of the videoplays in the 1980s the stories had plots hanging out. Nothing was quite right, and the acting very stiff, but the stories thrilled the city because in them, they see their hopes, aspirations and dreaded fears and hopelessness. Today the speed with which videoplays are released into the market is unbelievable. According to the visiting German filmmaker, Mieke Reinhard, 'good feature videos are being released on the average of one in a week or two in Ghana, but very few celluloid films due to its high costs of production' (1996:29).

Jonathan Haynes' study of Nigeria's cinema

industry provides a graphic picture of how the industry has managed to shift into the cheaper form of making movies: 'it is now impossible to produce a 16mm of good technical quality entirely in Nigeria, importing only the raw stock and to do most of the post-production work there as well' but the 'video resources in Lagos are considerable, with about twenty video production houses, and since a feature can be produced on video (for distribution by video cassette) for a tenth of the price of a celluloid film, there has been a pervasive structural adjustment towards video production.' (1995:97-78) It is the compelling need to keep the city narrative alive, together with the enthusiasm which many city dwellers display in support of this narrative. The viewing context of video is also another reason for its popularity. The relative safety of the home is surely preferable to the turbulence encountered in the cinema halls, with all the problems associated with the flotsam and jetsam of urban slum who frequent such places. Perhaps even more important is the fact that these videoplays include another group of movie audience that was kept on the fringe of film audience for a long time - the female audience. Before the emergence of indigenous home videoplay respectable women were mostly consigned to their homes for fear of the violence normally associated with movie houses. This meant that a large percentage of the potential audience was cut off.

Indigenous home videoplay changed all this, providing, for the first time, the female audience and her narrative of urban life in Nigerian cities. The female narrative may prove to be conservative because it is often written and articulated from the dominant patriarchal order (video producers are mainly men), but this too has signalled a change. Many videoplays in the Nigerian video market now deal with stories about women. *Obiora I* and *II* deal with a domestic *palava* in which the wives and women of Chief Obiora, the newly crowned Eze, dominate the course of action. Obiora, the husband and father of the home, remains a toothless bulldog vacillating between the extremes and devious designs of feuding wives and concubines. The interest in all such domesticities is the ability to make public what has remained for a long time in the private sphere of public life. Women in the city would be glad to see these

stories made public, because in them, their private lives unfold and in the handling of these stories, some of their fears are allayed.

There are three streams of the indigenous videoplay, all of which deal with the subject of violence, prostitution, witchcraft, moral questions bothering on ill-gotten wealth. These three streams meet in the city. They all discuss the city and the dwellers separated into cultural and religious units, each competing for places within the hectic and diabolic social and economic situations. These are the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa videoplays.

The Yoruba videoplay is well developed. Themes assume typical Yoruba world view, although later Yoruba videoplays such *Kosegbe* may be preoccupied with social satire, dealing with the bad guys (smugglers and their accomplices in the Customs Department) and the good guy, the newly appointed Director of the Customs Service. Mako, the custom's Chief was appointed to rid the service of bad eggs, together with the conniving smugglers. The immediate past chief of



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Customs, one of the notorious brains behind the deadly syndicate of smugglers would not hear of it. In any case, he is still bitter that he lost the job to Mako. With the help of dubious friends and women of loose values, Mako's family bond in torn to shreds. First, his son is set-up in a party. He is found with drugs. This is done to taint and upset the crusader. And then Mako is lured into an arranged sexual affair with one of the women of very questionable virtues. Gradually Mako is led into the most horrifying saga of his life-time. He soon realizes that there is little hope in what he does. He fights on, winning the battle against these bandits only after a series of hard tackles. Not surprisingly the title of this videoplay translates as 'You can't carry it'. Mako, tried, but couldn't get around carrying that heavy 'load': his will is not sufficient to pull his social crusade through. In other words what the video drama portrays is the filth of this corrupted city. The bad guys drive in stretch

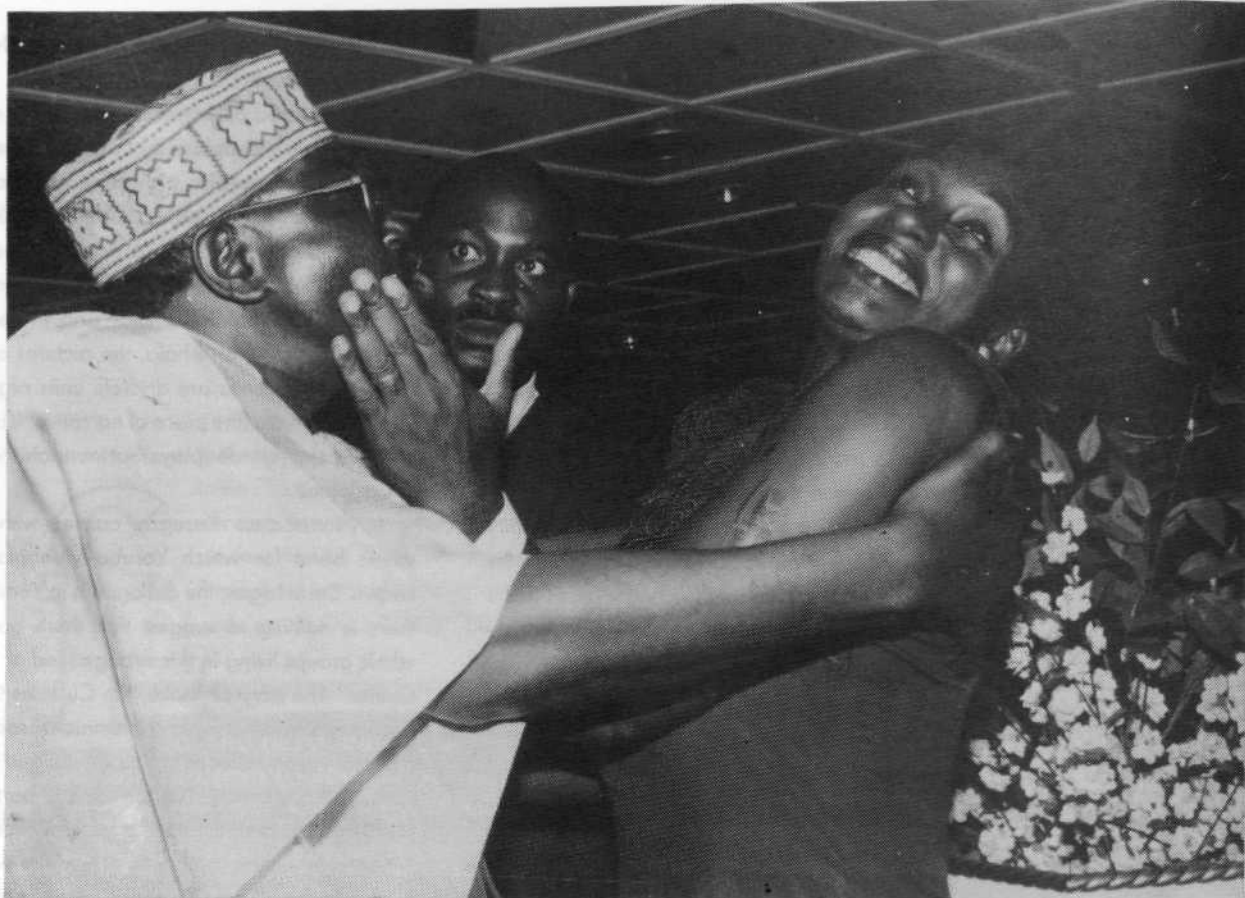
limousines, while the good guys lament in the dirty, slimy street corners.

Kosegbe is only one of the very small number of indigenous videoplays that deal with the urban problems. But it is also a clear representation of how well developed the Yoruba videoplay has been. Produced by Mainframe, one of the many video production houses in Lagos, with a script written by the famous scholar and professor of Yoruba studies, Akin Ishola, the pictures are well laid out. The scenes are discrete units organized and edited into a fine piece of narrative. It is unlike the many sloppy videoplays that inundate the video marketplace.

Nonetheless *Kosegbe* carries with it the ethnic bond for which Yoruba videoplays are known. Set in Lagos, the dialogue is in Yoruba and there is nothing to suggest that there are other ethnic groups living in this strange land of 'opportunities.' The story of Mako, the Customs Officer, becomes, in this videoplay an ethnic crusade, with a social vision reduced to the needs and aspirations of this ethnicity. But this is only part of the problems associated with a close identification to a particular ethnic group in a medium which is unabashedly urban. Nigeria's cities are mostly sprawling slums of a culturally pluralistic society in which ethnic origin becomes significant only when an economic or political issue is introduced. Yet *Kosegbe*, one of the most recent accounts of the corruption of urban Lagos, does nothing to problematise this vice across the ethnic line. This shortfall is itself a character of popular Yoruba urban entertainment.

Any discussion of Nigerian urban cultural practice and production such as the popular videoplay is intricately bound up with the unpredictable economics of the post oil-boom era. This economic situation is intricately woven with the new social and political conditions of uncertainty. Every work of art, official or unofficial, produced in this context carries the stamp of this complexity. Yoruba videoplay is very well implicated in this.

The Yoruba videoplay play is certainly the most developed in Nigeria. It came from a long enviable tradition. If we wish to stretch the matter of history, it is possible to locate in the popular performances of sixteenth century Yoruba. This is because the theatre tradition which later developed into what I have referred to elsewhere as the popular Yoruba cinema of the 70s and 80s had at



Scene from 'Violated'

one time or the other figures who were prominent in the practice of popular Yoruba travelling theatres of the 1940s and 1950s. Hubert Ogunde was one such figure. Referred to and venerated as the doyen of modern Nigerian theatre, Chief Ogunde who died just about when *Mr. Johnson* got out of location, was a member of the early Twentieth century edition of an Alarinjo troupe. He went on to collaborate with veteran Nigerian filmmaker, Ola Balogun, to make celluloid films based on some of his famous stage plays *Ayanmo* and *Aiye* to mention only two.

The films of Ogunde occupy a special place in the tableau of Yoruba cinema. Conservative and deeply traditional in outlook, Ogunde's films are invested with the supernatural in which fate is worked out as the causal path of the plot. In his hands, the Yoruba film, defined as a 'cultural encyclopedia' braided out of the universe of the Yoruba mind, primarily intended for the Yoruba audience' (1995) was exclusively monoethnic in practice and in thematic preoccupation. The themes of his films are explicit about the unchangeable paths cut out in the realm of human existence by the pantheons of Yoruba gods and goddesses.

Plotted around the morality story very much like the passion plays, these stories are about the triumph of good over evil forces in which Ogunde, the father figure or the symbol of the good forces triumphs and overwhelms the capriciousness and duplicity of the evil forces of *aje* (witches). *Ayanmo* is particularly interesting in this regard.

Moses Olaiya (Aka Baba Sala), the comedian is also thinly affiliated to the Alarinjo performance. He was with Ogunde at one time in his acting career. Today he is the undisputed king of comedy, having made very successful comedies such as *Mosebolatan* and *Are Agbaye* which have gone to define an indigenous comic genre in the Nigerian cinema. Baba Sala's style, like that of Hubert Ogunde, is eclectic, embarrassing the very ludicrous of our city life, but is also rustic. *Mosebolatan*, for instance, deals with the gullible of our existence. The landscape of his film is Yoruba, the language spoken is Yoruba, but the significance transcends this ethnicity.

The first Yoruba travelling theatre personnel to make it into the celluloid film was Ade Folayan. Having starred in Balogun's *Ajani Ogun*, he immediately saw the potential of the Yoruba stage on

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film. He allied with Ola Balogun and in 1977 produced *Ija Ominiran* which is perhaps his most successful film.

Ogunde, Baba Sala and Ade Folayan made these films on the regular 16m and 35mm gauges in the 1970s and early 80s. All this has changed.

Yet there are Yoruba filmmakers who made films about Yoruba life in the city without any strong affiliation to traditional Yoruba theatre practice. Although these filmmakers succumbed to the economic vagaries of the 1980s, resorting to producing dramas in the video format, they were keenly aware and deeply rooted in the tradition. The difference between these filmmakers such as Ladi Ladebo and Afolabi Adesanya and the directors who come from the Yoruba traditional theatre is the cosmopolitan make-up of their plays. In their films and videoplays we find the complexity of urban life, the complicated make-up of ethnic representation in the city, the ephemerality of life in the city, poverty and deceit; hopelessness and crime, fadism and violence. Ladi Ladebo's video dramas *Eewo* and *Vendor* are examples of the abiding urban interest among these filmmakers, yet they examine city life from a deeply conscious Yoruba paradigm.

Kosegbe, *Vigilante*, *Ti Oluwa Ni ile* are just a few examples of the new Yoruba plays dealing with the narrative of contemporary urban existence. In these videoplays, there is no urgency to recall the ideal past of some unsullied cultural landscape. The urgent need is to examine the precarious urban existence in which people live and die.

The Igbo videoplay is a recent phenomenon, but is nonetheless popular. This popularity is of course difficult to define in a straight way. Started only some five years ago, the world in most of the works are strangely urban with casual references to village life. In Igbo videoplays, ethnicity becomes the subsidiary point of reference. Nostalgia is never completely biased towards village life or to some rural life that was lived, now dead and longed for.

Mostly, they convey the traditional world in a simplistic manner. Traditional life is simply brought to bear on the urban characters who often think or have some relationships with traditional life. In *Living in Bondage*, everything happens in the city of Lagos. Andy, the main character, who is avaricious and gullible, gets entangled with a group of upwardly mobile dubious Igbo 'business men'. He envies them and would like to be part of their rich circle. Gradually, but carefully, he is let into the secret of the bizarre world of these people and when he insists that he will want to be like one of them, he is asked to present his wife for the sacrifice necessary to assure him of his position.

Once he is introduced to this deadly group and its evil deeds, he cannot opt out. He does what is wanted of him, kills his wife in a bizarre scene of ritual and immediately prospers. The narrative is very quick to get to this point. Andy enjoys his wealth for a time, doing what this class of upwardly mobile people know how best to do: philandering in bars, posh hotels; displaying conspicuous consumption patterns in the most awkward manner of the newly 'arrived.' This is the sign of his 'arrival'; it is the new way to acknowledge his new status in society. Andy does all these and then tries to marry a new wife. His problems begin here, not the least of which is the nightmarish apparition of his first wife hunting him.

At first, he manages to get over this. But this could not be for too long. The story must teach a moral lesson, while at the same time establishing the position of a new thieving and dubious social group. After a while, Andy goes mad, ravingly picking morsels from rubbish heaps in downtown Lagos. The news gets to Andy's village, a family council is summoned and a delegation sent to bring back the mad son from the city. The rest is a winding story of rehabilitation. Andy is taken to one of the Pentecostal churches and when nothing works he is removed to a *dibia's* home of herbal cures and spiritual exorcism. Meanwhile, nothing is said to the other members of the secret cult, who were instrumental to Andy's shattered world. The narrative does not try to give the options open to Andy as he faces the many problems of unemployment and other social problems - his wife is thrown out of job because she will not sleep with the boss. Interestingly the death of Andy's wife does not lead to criminal prosecution because this is outside the province of rational thinking. The ritual itself hap-

pens in the realm off the unknown, yet the actions unfold in a complicated hybrid urban culture, in which the characters try to negotiate their lives.

Open and accommodating as the Igbo video practice may seem, it is implicated in the shifting position of producers trying to walk over the problems of urban vices, cultural sense and the discussion of modernity. This problem is real in many respects. The Igbo videoplays, to use Jude Akudinobi's words, 'rather than constructing a monolithic persona anathematic to modernity, these works propose critical analysis of the self and the world' (1995:30). The argument goes further than this. These works also function to create or hegemonize a cultural self in conflict, but one which is often negotiated from the position of urban commodification.

Living in Bondage makes obvious this complexity in many ways. Why for instance does Andy go back to the village when he becomes mad? In this urban context, the immediate thing to have happened would have been to send him to an asylum for the mentally ill, certainly not to the village dibia or to the church. A deeply connected link between urban Igbo and the fading traditional presence think otherwise. Tradition is where the solution is to be found. All at once, the fancy of modern items and services withdraws into some obscure corner in the minds of those on whose shoulders the burden of taking care of Andy falls. In traditional Igbo society, the inexplicable is located in some transgression against traditional order, although the immediate cause of this catastrophe is located in the city.

In most of these video dramas, ethnicity is often constructed to suit individual preferences, especially as individuals living in towns and cities are given certain latitude to work out their existence in the daily contact with the outside world. It is not surprising therefore that Dr. Raymond, the nuclear physicist trained in America and who never got used to the local culture of Ikuku, negotiates the

communal desire for him to become the next chief priest of the shrine in an untraditional manner in the videoplay, *Ikuku*.

The Igbo video culture comes from a very different social background. Unlike the Yoruba video industry described as having a strong link with the oil-boom era, Igbo video industry is of the post-oil boom era. This is a period of intense crisis within Nigerian society. Social infrastructure sank abysmally and the need to reconsider the Union became the only debate that had meaning across ethnic groups. National identity was severely fractured, forcing the informal business sector to rethink video production both as a commercial venture and as a means of discussing their place in the nation. For this reason it becomes clearly difficult to think of Igbo video drama as merely a response to the Yoruba equivalent, which had existed since the 1970s. The forces of commodifying art became for the Igbo video entrepreneurs a way of evolving as many options in the choice of culturally diverse production process. For instance, the Igbo video maker cannot be bothered about who acts in any particular film, nor is he bothered about the ethnic origins of his actors. What matters for him is primarily, but not excessively, financial consideration. This does not mean that the videomaker cares less about his or her ethnicity. The videomaker is simply negotiating personal interest in order to survive the complicated character of this new society - the crass urban reality in which he lives. This is the pragmatic way out for him. This condition also exists in the Igbo videomaker's culture. Material wealth through hardwork is desirable. These values are recognized, but they also have to contend with the crass materialism of the post-oil boom that has little respect for hardwork and honesty. And because they live in a society that now pays less respect for hardwork and industry, they also feel that cheating is after all as profitable, at least in the cities.

There is also a boom in the Hausa language video dramas of Northern Nigeria. The social context may be different, but is obviously one of the tributaries which Biodun Jeyifo describes as 'solidly within the pale of an emergent national popular culture' (1984:5). It is certainly one of the several major tributaries, within which we locate the Yoruba and Igbo video cultures.

The social distinctions which Hausa videos exhibit are mostly conditioned by ethnicity, religion and gender. Hausa video dramas, according to

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and because they live in a society that now pays less respect for hardwork and industry, they also feel that cheating is after all as profitable, at least in the cities

Brian Larkin (1996) have a close affinity with Hindi films. Hindi films have been very popular and widely distributed in the North. Although a low class male activity, the early cinema culture has developed into the video culture which admits a large chunk of the female population. Video technology has made it possible for women in *kule* to be part of the *public* generated by Hausa video dramas. The video boom has helped for the first time to create, 'a private female public sphere' which is ultimately part of the emerging popular culture.

The link which Hausa videos have with the Hindi culture is interesting. The Hausa muslim has clearly defined religious and moral obligations, quite different from those of the Hindi culture. Yet Hindi films provide the religious and moral example for the Hausa videomaker. The Indian film has been part of Nigerian's cinema diet for over thirty years. The preference for the Indian cinema in the North is understandable. Indian melodramas

and comedies provide an alternative world for the Hausa youth.

Like the Yoruba and Igbo video dramas, the Hausa language video dramas address an audience with a similar set of postcolonial problems found mostly in the cities.

What does the variety of videoplays portend for a national popular culture? Our guess can only be tentative. The Igbo language videoplays show a likelihood of developing into an acceptable, all embracing urban art. What remains undisputed is the fact that the indigenous videoplay will retain its primary charm - the urban flavour. It is the medium in which the new literature of the city is written. It influences the city, and the city influences it. This is difficult to dispute.

Like many video industries in Africa, indigenous Nigerian video industry presents the 'seedy' and 'flashy' or urban Nigeria. An interesting narrative of our postcoloniality. **GR**


Notes

1. Amaka Igwe's position is a popular one. Many observers think that videoplay producers are often trying to ape Hollywood production systems. See also Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome's *Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Production* (Mimeograph: unpublished). For details on the comments by Amaka Igwe, see *The Guardian*, April 24, 1996:29).

2. Liberia does not have a regular film industry, but there is a thriving indigenous video industry which caters for local audience.

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