

Nigeria and India: The Use of Film for Development-Whispers in a Crowd

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Abstract

Nigeria and India have both attempted to use the film industry for development but in both cases the full potential of the medium has been stymied by lack of government support and a general feeling of disinterest among the nations' populations. But there are directors and producers in each country who are attempting to raise their voices above the commercially-dominated noise of their respective country's cinema.

Film could be a strong tool for development. It can be used to contribute to a feeling of nationhood, as a voice for national planning, to help teach necessary skills, to extend the effective market, to help people look to the future, and to prepare people to play a role in nation building. But without serious changes in the structure of government relations with the cinema in Nigeria and India changes may not come. A few directors and producers in each nation have started to use cinema for development, but their efforts must be fostered by the national government to be effective.

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Inde et Nigéria: Utilisation du Film pour le Développement

Résumé

Le Nigéria et l'Inde ont fait des tentatives pour utiliser l'industrie du film pour le développement, mais pour l'un et l'autre cas, le potentiel global de ce genre de médias a été frustré par l'absence du soutien du gouvernement et le désintéressement général des populations respectives des deux pays.

L'industrie du cinéma peut représenter un puissant outil pour le développement. Elle peut être utilisée pour développer le sentiment nationaliste en tant qu'expression de planification nationale pour aider à enseigner les techniques nécessaires, aider la population à avoir un regard sur l'avenir et la préparer à jouer un rôle dans le développement national.

Néanmoins, en l'absence des changements dans l'attitude du gouvernement vis-à-vis du cinéma aussi bien en l'Inde qu'au Nigéria on risque d'être forcé à la stagnation. Bon nombre de directeurs et réalisateurs de chacun des deux pays se sont déjà embarqués dans l'usage du film en tant qu'élément de développement, mais leurs efforts doivent être encouragés par le gouvernement pour être efficaces.

Introduction

Nigeria and India, though thousands of miles apart, have striking similarities that make a comparison of their use of cinema for development informative research. Both developing nations have the potential to cater for the highest populations on their respective continents. Nigeria had a mid-1990 population of 117 million, making it the most populous nation in Africa (Van Baren, 1991). India, by World Bank estimates, will have more than one billion inhabitants by the year 2000. Both nations have extremely diverse cultures, languages and religions. Nigeria has more than 250 different ethnic groups within its borders.

Both of these vast and populous nations have at least made an attempt to use film as a method of development, but neither too extensively or with much success. But things appear to be changing in the case of India. The volume of films produced in India has been astounding (Downing, 1987), but the actual contribution of the majority of these films to development is questionable. In Nigeria's case, vestiges of colonialism have left the means of production mostly in the hands of Westerners, leaving indigenous African producers very little opportunity to create their own cinematic works (Diawara, 1984). But there have been exceptions and some indigenous directors have contributed to the production of a small cache of films with development themes, recognized as true classics by the international film industry.

This paper will survey the historical, economic and social background of the Indian and Nigerian film industry and assess its contribution to each nation's development. The paper will analyze two particular films — one from each nation — to assess, at least in microcosm, what has and has not worked in both efforts. Then it will offer suggestions on how to make better use of the power of cinema as a vehicle for innovation and change. The paper will also identify successful cinematic development in each country and emphasize how further work along such lines could benefit future efforts.

The primary method used in the paper is a historical evaluation of both countries' use of cinema for development. A critical content analysis of the two films in the case study provides examples of typical motion pictures produced by their respective industries. The general themes, means of production, and level of government financial contributions to each film are cited as examples of the successes and failures in communicating development themes.

Conceptualization

Film can help spread ideas of development through means of communication grounded in the new or integrated paradigm. The subjects of such films can generate discussion among audience members and reinforce the innovations or development themes proposed by face-to-face communication. According to Mowlana and Wilson (1990, p. 143), "in projects that use film in a more explicitly developmental manner and context, the medium usually takes more of a supporting role. In such projects, care

must be exercised to plan appropriate facilities". In the cases of Nigeria and India, the cinema is a fairly popular medium that could easily reach a large segment of the population. In comparison to other developing countries, both nations have an abundance of theaters and the potential to reach large audiences.

Film can have advantages and uses that go beyond other forms of mass media. Film has the advantages of mobility and flexibility, which the broadcast media alone do not possess. Although frequently used in conjunction with broadcast technology such as television, film can also be used independently in local gatherings or for project training purposes. In fact, the necessity of a community gathering to see a film is one of the benefits of this medium; subsequent discussion and peer reinforcement are valuable in achieving the purposes of projects. Film is also widely applicable in education projects (Mowlana and Wilson, 1990, p. 143).

In the context of this research, development is regarded as a term different from that which is generally used in most mass communication research. It does not necessarily mean technological development, but is more man-oriented. The concept of development in the context of film is one of liberation. Enahora (1989) quotes Claude Ake saying, "If we think in terms of liberation we can accept that we are not all that we ought to be without necessarily feeling inferior to someone else. If we think in terms of liberation, we will open the question of the path of our social evolution instead of committing ourselves blindly to the path someone else has taken" (p. 105).

The cinema in both Nigeria and India could be used to contribute to a feeling of nationness and as a voice for national planning, to help teach skills, to extend the effective market, to look to the future and to prepare people to play their role as a nationals among nations (Enahora, 1989, p. 105). The cinema in both nations has diverted its attention away from questions of national development. Yet, it can improve the quality of life much more easily since it overcomes the barrier of illiteracy. This research takes the position that film can have such a decisive role in development with proper support from government and with proper planning and implementation.

Case Study: Nigeria

Nigeria underwent a virtual cultural transformation 50 years prior to its independence on October 1, 1960. The process of decolonization came only after "Western religious, economic, political and educational forms deeply penetrated the country. Enormous transformations resulted and led to a devolution of many traditional forms while many of the transplanted Western forms evolved into major institutions" (Jarmon, 1988, p. 9). Although Nigeria is independent, deep cultural and social connections with the West remain. The nation's film industry, for example, has remained virtually dominated by Western filmmakers and their products.

Nigeria is a country of many nations within a nation. There are more than 250 different ethnic groups within its borders (Obotette, 1985). Many difficulties in selecting an appropriate development program, especially in the film industry, which requires some homogeneous knowledge of cultures and political systems, stem from the nature

of Nigeria's diverse cultural backgrounds. There are three major ethnic divisions. It is believed that the country's "unique problems lay not in the scores of small tribes, but in (these) three principal groups, each large enough to be a nation" (Obotette, 1985, p. 29).

Prior to independence in Nigeria, film was the monopoly of the white directors and producers. The medium was thought to be too complex for indigenous Africans to produce any substantial films. "The argument went firstly that these films were technically too sophisticated for the African mind to understand, and secondly that they were a bad influence on Africans because they depicted the negative aspects of European lives" (Diawara, 1984, p. 10). Even after independence in 1960, films remained under the control of Europeans for years until a small cadre of Africans began to train in film making skills.

Nigeria ranks as one of the biggest producers of films in Africa, only surpassed by Francophone nations like Senegal. The nation has more than 100 movie theaters (Diawara, 1984). Directors such as Ola Balogun, a Nigerian novelist and playwright, have been successful in the country where a vast population makes it possible for such artists to survive on local revenue from their films alone.

But by Western standards, Nigerian productions have been few and far apart. Balogun attributes this relatively sparse production and consumption of Nigerian films produced by Africans to a vestige of colonialism. He argues that such preference for Western products stems from the habits of Nigerians to consume products made in Great Britain during the colonial epoch. Film is such a product. "Today, film distribution in Nigeria is in the hands of foreign companies, which dictate their will in the matter of the cinema. Since the distributors benefit more in buying, at a very low price, old American, English and Indian films, their policy has consisted, then, in discouraging all attempts to create a national film production" (Diawara, 1984, p. 22).

In Nigeria, films are the province of businessmen who can raise the capital to effect their production and distribution. Some Nigerian directors have put pressure on the government to nationalize distribution, but the so-called "liberal" economic systems of the nation prefer to leave the work to private local businessmen. The Indigenization Decree of 1972 "gave exclusive monopoly for the distribution and exhibition of feature films to Nigerians with the capital and business contacts," (Diawara, 1984, p. 182) but, as Diawara stated, "the feature films produced in Nigeria by Nigerians are having marketing difficulties" because the government has not made an effort to enforce the decree.

So any idea of supporting development cinema through government means at this time is next to impossible in Nigeria. The Nigerian cinema has relied primarily on films of "oriental martial arts, thrillers, Indian melodrama and American action-adventures. Nigerians have been overfed with these cinedrugs" (Enahora, 1989, p. 102).

A prime example of this is "The Mask," directed by Eddie Ugboma. This is our Nigerian case-study. "The Mask" premiered in London in 1980. The story is about recovering a part of African cultural heritage which has been stolen by colonialist art

scavengers. The heritage is the mask of Queen Adesua of Benin, stolen from Nigeria in 1815 by a British officer and eventually ending up on display in the British Museum. The actual mask became an object of tension between Nigeria and Britain. In 1977, Nigeria demanded its return (Downing, 1987).

"The film owes part of its inspiration to this controversy for, as Ugboma points out, it is dramatization of how Nigerians could have more satisfactorily recovered their property" (Downing, 1987, p. 21). Critics pointed to the movie as an allegory for the loss of cultural identity in many developing nations because of the influence of the former colonial powers in Nigeria and other nations.

But "the Mask" is an example of where these concerns for such cultural imperialism are completely lost in the problem itself. Lost in the blatantly Western manner that Obagum tells the story. The plot of the film has a James Bond-style agent, Major Obi (dubbed agent 009), working for the Nigerian government, using high-technology gadgets to recover the mask. The bulk of the action takes place not in Nigeria, but London. Obi manages to squeeze in displays of that staple of all Bond films — the passionate love scenes, but this time with black gusto! (Downing, 1987, p. 21).

The plot alone reveals the lack of seriousness in the film's goal. Nigerian critics decried the film for a myriad of flaws in conception, style, performance, coherence and ideology. The film is a bad example of what Ali Mazrui labels "counterpenetration." Nigerian directors and producers use Western themes in their films, merely transplanting them to Nigerian soil.

Although "The Mask" was a commercial success by Nigerian standards, it lost a valuable opportunity to confront a true problem of national development — the export of Nigerian resources by the West coupled with the problem of Western media overshadowing the efforts of Nigerians — to flashy Hollywood-style escapist appeal. Nigerian critics faulted Obagum for wasting such a potent instrument of mass political education as film in a purely entertainment method (Downing, 1987).

Case Study: India

Indian cinema has always been an astonishing medium. The nation's output of film production has spiraled incredibly in recent decades.

India makes one out of every four theatrical films produced annually in the world and, since 1971, has been first in the world in the number of films produced annually. Cinema has been ranked as one of India's ten largest industries, producing an average of about two feature films per day. During the 1970s, India was the only Third World nation among the world's major film exporters, selling films to some one hundred foreign countries. By 1983, weekly attendance at movie theaters had reached ninety-one million, and the recently increased dissemination of films through video cassettes and television had enlarged the total audience for Indian films, although it has cut down on actual attendance at movie theaters (Downing, 1987, p. 145).

India's commercial cinema developed under colonial rule, the only major national cinema to have done so. Since independence, the growth of India's cinema has been astronomical: from 241 features in 1950, output rose to 305 in 1960, 396 in 1970, 462 in 1975, 710 in 1980 and 763 in 1983. Though there was, by the 1980s, a large number of schemes on both the national and state levels to foster the development of the cinema, the roots of the upsurge lie within the growth of Indian capitalism, as the film industry, with its peculiar financial structure, offered a direct reflection of the amount of risk capital (often illegally acquired, or at least hidden from tax authorities) generated in the Indian economy (Armes, 1987, p. 177).

Much of the impetus to produce films in India has been at the state level; but there has also been crucial input from the national government. The government took on a direct involvement with the industry through the establishment of the Film Finance Corporation (FFC), and Indian Motion Picture Association (IMPEC), whose functions were merged in 1980 under the umbrella of the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) (Armes, 1987).

The NFDC has been mainly responsible for sponsoring international film festivals and funding some production and distribution of "quality" films. The funding has led to the development of a type of Indian film that has been called the "New Indian Cinema" by some authors. This type of cinema is fostered through direct support from both the state and central governments. The forerunner of these films was "Pather Pachali" produced and directed by the notable Satyajit Ray. The movie was produced completely from a grant from the government of West Bengal. "This example has been widely imitated in India, and government and state aid for production has been plentiful, but such initiatives have never been accompanied by a similar development of an art house exhibition circuit" (Armes, 1987, p. 123).

Although most Indian films continue to reflect the purely-entertainment commercialism, there was a clear sign in 1980s "of attempts to bridge the gulf between the commercialism of the all-India movie and the esotericism of much of the new Indian Cinema" (Armes, 1987, p. 127). Even though the New Indian Cinema is not an organized, clearly cohesive movement in the nation, its film makers are linked by their rejection of commercial cinema's values, themes and stylistic approaches. And New Indian Cinema directors and producers tackle the issues of development with gusto. As Downing (1987) notes "in dealing with social and political issues, most New Cinema films tend to reveal problems rather than suggest solutions or attempt to mobilize their audiences toward action, but a growing number of new Cinema film makers are concerned with possible political role of cinema in transforming India into a more just society" (p. 152).

But the New Indian Cinema has faced some obstacles. One major blockade to the successful distribution of development films is the barrier of language. There are 16 official languages in India, but most films tend to be produced in the Hindi language because it is accessible to the largest number of people. Another obstacle is the New Indian Cinema's reliance on commercial distribution and exhibition of films. The government has been slow in responding to this problem.

Some films have run into the barrier of India's rigorous system of government censorship. "This system has served to reinforce the inherently conformist tendencies of commercial cinema. In contrast, New Cinema films have tested and sometimes extended the boundaries of censorship, especially in relation to politically and socially sensitive subjects such as political corruption or religious and caste tensions" (Downing, 1987, p. 153).

The case study film for this paper is an unusual Indian film that tested the government's limitations. Shyam Benegal's "Manthan" (The Churning, 1975) was funded by 500,000 Indian farmers — members of the Gujarat Milk Marketing Foundation — who donated two rupees apiece to its production. The movie is the story of an attempt by a small government-sponsored team to organize a milk marketing cooperative in a village of the western state of Gujarat. The investing farmers turned out in bus-loads for its premier in 1976 (Barnouw and Krishaswamy, 1980).

The film, which communicated some important development themes, met with great commercial success. "Manthan's primary focus is on caste and class oppression in Indian rural life. It is about the struggles to organize a cooperative in opposition to the entrenched rural power structure" (Downing, 1987, p. 152). The film begins with a scene of railroad tracks, accompanied by a folk-style song on the beauties of the village and inviting a stranger to visit it. The entire film addresses the questions of government intervention to bridge the gap between the accelerated development of the cities to the slow changes of the rural villages and farms.

Conclusion

Although both countries have made use of the medium of film for development purpose, Nigeria and India differ in the cooperation that their respective governments have given to such efforts. Though cinema in both nations has bias for entertainment-oriented movies of the West, India stands out from the pair. Its government has supported the nation's New Cinema through grants and support for the construction of theaters that would primarily show such motion pictures.

Nigeria has shown a rather lame start in the field of cinema for development. Because of the vast influences of capital and production from outside the nation, indigenous filmmakers have been stymied in their attempts to produce films that educate and inform rather than merely entertain. With few exceptions, the Nigerian film industry has relied on Western themes and messages in their movies.

Enahora (1989) criticizes the condition of the Nigerian film industry when he remarks "Films screened in Nigerian theaters today have neglected our educational philosophy, its goals and objectives, our institutional framework and cultural background. They have created social and cultural problems" (p. 100). The structure of Nigerian film industry remains much the same as when it was controlled by the colonial powers.

Enahora's conclusion that a radical restructuring of the Nigerian film industry is necessary to promote the more effective use of the art for development methods should be taken seriously. Following the Indian example, the Nigerian government should contribute to the development of the industry through financial support and protection from outside competition. "Nationalization of the film distribution and exhibition industry in Nigeria would contribute greatly to development of film industry. This method has worked in Algeria, Brazil, and Burkina Faso and if this is correctly interpreted, it would create the same favorable conditions in Nigeria" (Enahora, 1989, p.108).

As Enahora notes, dialogue cannot exist in the absence of the exploiter's interest and absence of faith in the development of film industry in Nigeria. "The answer to the question is not negotiation but nationalization because the culture of domination can only be confronted through action" (Enahora, 1989, p. 108). Nigeria should nationalize the film industry complete with educational and production facilities and thus create an atmosphere where locally produced films could compete with the influential movies of the West. The Nigerian public must be re-educated in their appreciation of film to the point where both feature and documentary are of equal worth.

As for India, the efforts there seem to be in the right direction. The government should offer more financial support to the nascent New Indian Cinema to promote more films with development themes. But compared to Nigeria, things there seem to be burgeoning. In both countries the national government must recognize the value of film for development and education. India and Nigeria should make use of film to improve the well-being of the majority of their citizens.

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