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Message films in Africa: A look into the past

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Abstract: Message film-making has characterised much of films produced in post-independent Kenya. The country produced very few films in the 1980s, when indigenous film-making actually began to take root. Liberalisation of the economy, embracement of the digital technology and democratization in the 1990s paved way for a more stable film culture in the decade. A more promising growth of the film industry has been largely witnessed since the turn of the 21st century. Through this period, I note a strong tendency to produce films that are loaded with social messages deemed urgent and important to the target audience. In making these films, the film-makers hope to make a positive impact in the lives of the target audiences. These films tend to valorise the message, sometimes, neglecting the basic filmic codes, a practice that renders the films less entertaining. This endangers the growth of the industry since local films find very stiff competition from foreign films that are common on Kenyan screens. This study therefore investigates possible roots of message film-making in Africa that directly influence the tendencies in Kenya by making references to other African countries' film experiences. My assumption is that Kenya's cultural experiences are shared by other African countries.

Subjects: African Studies; Area Studies; Arts; Communication Studies; Development Studies; Theatre & Performance Studies; Visual Arts

Keywords: message films; Kenyan film; postcolonial films; oral tradition; colonial films; third cinema

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Applying literature review approach, this study examines possible roots of message film-making in Africa that have influenced tendencies in the Kenyan film industry today. In order to put the Kenyan cinema within perspective, experiences in other African countries are invoked. This is motivated by the assumption that Kenya, though clearly demarcated geographically, does not exclusively exist, culturally independent of other African countries' experiences. The country produced very few films in the 1980s, when indigenous film production actually began to take root. Yet, with liberalisation of the economy, democratization and the upsurge of video and digital film-making technologies, a more promising growth of the film industry has been largely witnessed from the turn of the 21st century. However, didacticism still lingers strongly in these films, and this paper links this phenomenon to: Orature, colonialism and Third Cinema Movement.

1. Introduction

In this paper, possible historical and cultural backgrounds that may have helped shape the didactic stance taken by many Kenyan films such as *Kolormask*, *Saikati*, *Pieces for Peace* and *Unseen, Unsung, Unforgotten* are explored. Even though the paper is inspired by the didactic tendencies in the Kenyan film industry, I draw a lot of my arguments from the experiences of other countries in Africa. This is because the Kenyan cinema is quite young, with scanty research work on film. Secondly, largely similar socio-historical backgrounds tend to typify the cultural artefacts from Africa.

In film and other arts, the didactic approach as expressed by scholars such as Philip Sydney and Samuel Johnson, reflects a relation to the philosophy that cultural artefacts including film, literature and theatre are universal communicators of some important information.¹ These art forms were, until the 19th century, viewed as instructors in moral affairs while performing other aesthetic functions as well. This is one of the principles that inform didacticism, a theory of the arts that gives more weight to the instructional than the artistic role of cultural products.

Several factors may have worked towards the rise of the message film-making style in Africa and particularly in Kenya. Most of these could be directly or indirectly attributed to the circumstances surrounding individual productions. These may include a film's budget, the intents of the producer or the producing company and the nature and the needs of the target audience as perceived by the producer or director. Nevertheless, three main factors seem to cut across as the main initiators of this sub-genre in African cinema in general. With deepest roots—of the three—is the indigenous oral cultural tradition in the African continent. This tradition has been in existence for as long as the continent's populace has existed. The others are the impact of colonial contact and its aftermath. Colonial aftermath, though much newer, has drastically intertwined its way into the continent's cultural fabric.

A significant portion of what constitutes African cultural, symbolic and intellectual thought and practices—be they oral, written, dramatic, visual, or filmic,—can be characterised as responses to, and interventions in, the factors and forces that have shaped Africa over time (Cham, 2004, p. 48).

For Mazrui (1986), these factors are largely categorised as indigenous, Arab/Islamic and Euro-Christian. These forces have defined different regions of Africa in varying degrees. For example, the impact of Euro-Christian factor is much less felt in Northern Africa much as the Arab-Islamic factor least affects the Southern African countries. How these factors interact and coexist amid many tensions and conflicts emerging from this coexistence have resulted in the cultural shape of Africa as we know it today. The society shapes the cultural artefacts it produces. Film-makers, like the other artists, strive to produce what is relevant to their target audience. Therefore, this multifaceted background of the continent dictates what the film-makers produce for their audiences. Kenyan cinema is influenced by this diversified background. Euro-Christian and indigenous forces are more prominent in this industry due to the depth with which the Kenyan society has encountered them. Indigenous forces are deeply rooted in the people's lifestyle as it can be viewed as inherent. Encapsulated in the indigenous oral traditions, this force finds an artistic mandate to creep into the country's cinematic culture.

2. Film experience in colonial east Africa

The didactic film-making mode in Kenya can be clearly understood against a backdrop of the role British colonial government envisaged that film should play in the colonial process not only in Kenya but also in the other colonies. What Mazrui (1986) calls "Euro-Christian force," though foreign to Africa just like its counterpart "Arab-Islamic force," was more easily absorbed due to the European colonial policy that ensured cultural erosion with less integration. The impact of Euro-Christian film cultures as they interacted with the indigenous communities at the height of colonisation is still felt in the Kenyan cinematic scene today. The didactic strand in the colonial films has continued to reinforce the message film-making tradition in Kenya.

From mid 1920s, the British colonial office started to explore the possible influence of the use of the new mediums of radio and film in the colonies and their impact on the colonial process. The effect of film seemed to supersede that of radio; its visual component gave it immense powers over radio and any other medium of communication at the time. These powers were summarised in the words of one J. Russell Orr who is quoted to have said a “successful film has a greater circulation than any newspaper and than any book except the Bible.”²

With this mindset, the colonial office set out to exploit the usability of film not only as a medium of instruction, but also as a tool for propagating propaganda. Cinema began to be seen as the greatest agent of international communication with an incalculable moral and emotional influence on children as well as adults. Due to this realisation, film agenda featured prominently in the later colonial office deliberations, and most significantly in the colonial office conference convened in 1927. It is as a result of film-related debates at this conference that Colonial office films committee, was later set up to deliberate on the questions of cinema in education. When the committee later sent a British colonial officer, Julian Huxley, to East Africa in 1929 to test the ‘natives’ reception of instructional films, he found a medical doctor, A. Paterson of Kenya Department of Medical and Sanitary Service, already successfully using a film he had produced for instructional purpose in Africa. The film, *Harley Street in the Bush*, had been a major force in the campaign against hookworm at the East African coastal strip. The British colonial office’s proposal to use cinema in the colonies was significant in two ways: How it affected the economy and political interests of the empire and how the imperial power could use it to promote what the Empire viewed as the economic, social and moral welfare of the colonies (Smyth, 1979, p. 437).

The earliest film-making exposure Kenya had was in 1936 when the British Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment (BECE) started operating in East Africa. The main purpose of the British Empire’s establishment of BECE was “to educate the Africans to perpetuate colonial traditions and provide entertainment” (Ngayane, 1998/1999, p. 13). Thus, the idea of infusing message or information into entertainment was part and parcel of film-making in East Africa and by extension, in Kenya from the beginning.

Stationed in Tanganyika and sponsored by the international missionary council, the Carnegie foundation and the British colonial office, BECE produced a total of 35 16-mm films between 1936 and 1937. The films were exhibited on mobile screens around East and Central Africa to over 100,000 viewers. Thitherto, the local populations did not take part in the film production process. Of greater significance to this study however, is that the films made were majorly didactic in nature. The films’ themes revolved around the British civilising mission, capturing such topics as coffee marketing, the need to bank with the Post Office Savings Bank, the need to pay taxes, soil erosion, infant malaria, boy scouts among others (Banfield, 1964, p. 13, Diang’a, 2007, pp. 54–56, Smyth, 1979, p. 437).

When BECE became defunct in 1937, the British colonial office had become aware of the immense power of film as a medium of mass instruction. In early 1936, a proposal for establishment of a Colonial Film Unit (CFU) had been submitted by a colonial officer, S. A. Hammond. Hammond had seen cinema as a means of educating people into “citizenship” of the Empire (Smyth, 1979, p. 447). Although the colonial office had then put his idea aside primarily on financial grounds, Hammond’s dream was only realised later during Second World War when the old British General Post Office Film Unit was transformed into the Crown Film Unit operating under the British Ministry of Information.³ Later on, the unit’s work in and for the colonies was handed to a separate organisation, the CFU. CFU was founded in 1939 within the British Ministry of Information to disseminate information, christened the “right propaganda,” about the war and elucidate the impact of the war on England’s general population. Film was trusted as a reliable instrument of correspondence especially between the elites and the masses. Smyth (1988, p. 285) posits that

England’s ruling Elite had great faith in the power of the cinema as an instrument of persuasion when communicating with the masses Film was to be in the front line of the war propaganda attack launched by the Ministry of Information.

Nonetheless, the effect of CFU's propaganda soon streamed out of Britain into her colonies. The government sent out such units to various colonial territories and by early 1950s there were permanent working film units in East and West Africa. The film messages worked very well with the non-literate Africans and cinema's visual power cut across the linguistic barriers that had earlier on hampered communication to the colonies. Film propaganda was commented by the few Africans who could speak both English and local languages. In Kenya, the colonial government set up a CFU in 1950 to produce and distribute mainly propaganda films on the *Mau Mau* uprising.

Although film was viewed as a propeller of good morals by the proponents of didacticism, depending on one's perspective, it was also criticised for spreading or painting undesired pictures of the empire. Brennan (2005, p. 481) identifies

... the anxieties held by European officials and settlers towards the corrupting influence of Western cinema on "impressionable" African filmgo-ers. Such a corruption, Europeans feared, might undermine the racial boundaries that supported colonial hierarchies.

A particular case in point was the impact of American films on the colonies. By 1932 for example, most cinemas in Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar and the current Zimbabwe were obtaining their films from South African suppliers who provided mainly American films. The colonial office feared that American films would spread other ideas and ideals especially into the colonies. Realising that commercial films, like those of Charlie Chaplin, could probably show the colonies the negative side of the Europeans, it became necessary for the films from Europe and North America to be re-edited in order to be shown in Africa. This would prevent film from communicating what major L. A. Notcut, the pioneer of BECE referred to as "wrong ideas" about the British Empire.

Apart from propaganda film-making and distribution, the CFUs performed a major task in training Kenyans to produce films, a move that played a role in establishing a culture that would later be explored to give rise to the current film industry in the country.⁴ After the war, CFU intensified its production role more than distribution. Jean Rouch sees this as CFU organiser, William Seller's long-term motive that was concealed behind making of war propaganda films. Rouch says, "if the immediate goal of the CFU was to make war propaganda, its organiser, W. Sellers, in fact, had in mind a long-range project—establishing a systematic way to utilise film with an African audience."⁵ This opened an avenue for Sellers to impart a film-making culture among the Africans. First effort towards having an African behind the camera was witnessed when Jack Beddington, the head of the films division in the CFU insisted, against Sellers' resistance, that it was necessary to have an African to advise the producers on African life and customs.⁶ This led to a Nigerian musician—Fela Sowande - joining the team in 1944.

Although the plan was that Africans should be trained to take over the work of the units, more progress was made towards this objective in West Africa than in East Africa. Training the Africans to make films may have been one of Sellers' ways of achieving his goal of "utilising film with the African an audience." However, according to Smyth (1989, p. 390), "in East Africa, a different policy was followed; Africans were attached to the CFU units, but the European film-makers were so occupied with film production that training was neglected." As a result, Kenyans only learnt through observation if not apprenticeship. What was gathered was applied in the production of early indigenous films such as *Kolormask*.

When independence euphoria hit African countries in the 1950s through the 1960s, there existed a general hegemonic assumption that once the Empire was out of the way, the newly independent states would easily graduate into economic and political ecstasy. Film was not to be left behind in this journey. Within the two decades, "nations like Ghana, Burkina Faso, Kenya, and (*sic*) Guinea made attempts to develop their film industries." (The countries) "saw film as a way to enlighten and educate the people and as away to explain policies" (Giraud, 2008, p. 97–8). In Kenya, the most significant development to film-makers in this period was not just the establishment of the Kenya

Broadcasting Corporation, but more importantly, the setting up of the Kenya Film Corporation in 1967 to localise film importation and distribution in the country. Previously, the film distribution in Kenya, and in the larger continent was run mainly by foreign film distributing companies such as the American Motion Picture Export Company (AMPECA) (Kerr, 1995).⁷ However, it was only in the 1980s that KFC's other function of film production was realised in the production and release of *Kolormask* in 1985 and 1986, respectively.

Of significance too, in relation to this, are the activities of the Department of Film Services under the Ministry of Information. By the time indigenous fiction film-making began in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s, vestiges of the information-filled film-making style had found their way into the films produced. For, in Africa at that time, social commitment was inevitably a crucial part in the production of cultural artefacts. As such, just like in the other parts of Africa, the pioneer creative films made in Kenya were highly socially committed.

With the onset of the post-independence era in Africa, it was only natural that didactic entertainment would start exploring the use of cultural instruments from the West. Borrowing from this new interaction, and drawing so much from the already established oral tradition in Africa, the resultant cultural artefacts were an infusion of both African and European cultural products. Thus, African film, emerging at this hybridised space and time, was not spared. In Kenya, this was solely undertaken by the ministry of Information's Department of Film services which produced development-oriented documentaries for different government ministries. The films produced and distributed by DFS covered several historic and developmental matters in the country. This is an indication that some of the filmic traditions initially observed by the traditional film-makers—in this case the colonial Centre—have found their way into the contemporary Kenyan message films.

3. African oral tradition and its influence on African film

3.1. *The interface between film and the oral tradition in Africa*

According to Hussein (2005), p. 15, "Africa's long tradition of oral artistry still wields a remarkable influence on the contemporary life of its society". Film being a medium of expression within this "life" is not exempted from the exertion of the oral tradition. Film, an art form initially imported into Kenya currently draws from and rearticulates the Kenyan indigenous culture's oral traditional codes. The entry of foreign art forms into the indigenous sociocultural network of Africa called for ways that would find a conducive middle ground suitable for the coexistence of forms of expression which initially seemed dichotomous. For African film, finding this position was inevitable. Looking at films such as *Wend Kuuni*, *Xala*, among others, there is evidently a heavy reliance on the continent's indigenous oral tradition. This becomes more pronounced within the postcolonial context of their production which, has been widely characterised by a hybridity of cultural products including film (Diawara, 1992). This is why any theorisation of African cinema calls for a descriptive more than a prescriptive approach. African film should be understood in terms of its ability to fit within as well as to modify the established universal film codes. Even though Diawara (*Ibid*) attempts a vivid categorisation of African film, Murphy (2000), p.14 says "we do not yet have the theoretical basis to talk about national or ethnic film styles. Instead ... (he proposes) an approach that attempts to negotiate the relationship between the 'universal' and the 'local' aspects of filmmaking."

For instance, some film-makers have adapted oral tales into the silver screen. This calls for an alternative approach to our understanding of certain concepts within film studies. Albert Wandago's *Simbi Nyaima* (2004), is an example of such a film. It relates the mythical story of the origin of a small lake in Western Kenya called Simbi. The story is told by a narrator, who takes up the role of a *griot*.⁸ Although *griot's* role and position in the society vary from one ethnic group or region to another, his "functions may range from that of scholar, mediator or advisor to that of musician or storyteller." (Thackway, 2002, p. 233). In the film's credits, the director shares responsibility on the story. Initially, the narrator creates a performance/narration of a tale, yet on the other hand, a film director is equally responsible for a film's artistic content including performance. In the oral arts, a

narrator modifies the performance in such a way that he becomes the “author” of the performance. Going by the *auteurist* film thought, a film’s director is viewed as its “author.” Thus, narrating for film brings in a new dimension of shared responsibility over the performance. African film-makers who chose to have an oral narrator tell the story, slightly adjust the conventional understanding of such concepts as authorship both in the Oral tradition and in the contemporary film medium. Such adjustments are considered crucially necessary in a postcolonial arena where negotiation between different cultures as explained by Homi Bhabha (2004) is inevitable. Post-independent African society resides in such a ground. Such a multicultural set-up is “saturated with politics of transformation: be it expressed as conflict, through calm consensus or in self-conscious gestures of reconciliation” (Jacobs, 2001, p. 11) “Conflict,” “calm consensus” or “reconciliation” can be identified not only at political level but also at the cultural level exemplified by cultural artefacts such as film and the oral narrative.

4. Didacticism in oral art forms and film in Africa

From early stages of life, all humans express an intense desire to understand or to make sense of their surrounding in their bid to understand it. Inventing stories is one of the ways by which this desire is satisfied. These stories not only provide an ‘understanding of the surrounding,’ but they also provide pleasure or entertainment. Both are crucial for one’s well-being since pleasure is good for the Freudian *id*, while information is necessary for the *ego* and *superego* as it enables the society to cultivate various virtues.

It is rather selfish to admit that all humans desire entertainment or pleasure more than information where there is a choice between the two. Generally, once one gets information, the social expectations change. The world expects to see the impact of that information in the individual’s daily life. On the other hand, once one gets entertained, what he does with that entertainment depends on him. It is the obligation to marry these two that makes message film-making tricky. Njogu (2005, p. 55) posits that

The solution is to make the message or information a part of the show. Our forefathers in Africa were aware of this hence our oral traditional art of story. In order to keep the audience captivated, songs, dance and the whole gamut of theatre have long been used for the dissemination of cultural and social information, values and norms.

That is to say that the most important factor in making it possible for a narrative to entertain as well as to instruct or to inspire us is for the creative artist to project himself into his characters, whether imaginary or real. For, in the traditional African context, the arts ‘traditionally’ play a socio-educational role in the society (Otieno, 2008, p. 31, Thackway, 2002, p. 219). With industrialisation and the emergence of electronic media, the oral and the printed word is no longer the primary mode of storytelling. Film and television screens have found space within this arena as mediums of relaying stories. In Africa, the screen story found an already established oral tradition whose entrenchment as a medium of education has been shaken neither by literacy nor by the screen culture itself.

In Africa, orature or artistic productions were both entertaining and educative. In this duality, and as a result of this background, one wonders whether there is a time in Africa when entertainment was never useful because since the pre-colonial time, Africa has never afforded “art for art’s sake” (Diawara, 1992). Some of the earliest conceptions of what an African film industry would be like were proposed by Paulin Viyera, leading a small group called Le Groupe Africain du Cinema in 1958. Francophone Africa wanted to set up an international film centre in Dakar to be used to produce educational films.⁹ For African film-makers, the didactic stance that their oral backgrounds bring into their films only complements what can be seen to be originally the purpose of the invention of the short film genre. After the advent of feature film, early short films banded around the documentary work of John Grierson and his colleagues Basil Wright and Edgar Anstey at the Empire marketing Board in England and around the work of Parre Lorentz and William van Dyke in the United States of

America. The works of these film-makers were issue driven, encouraging the governments to intervene in the economy of the USA or promoting the benefits of government policies in the United Kingdom. The films did not revolve around a particular event. They had neither protagonist nor antagonist. They mostly had “essay-like” structures rather than narratives. The films were mostly viewed as propaganda as they were motivated by drama of real-life issues with a political consciousness (Cooper & Dancyger, 2005, p. 2).

Diawara (1992), in his attempt to theorise African cinema, comes up with three main categories under which most African films up to the early 1990s fall. Social realist films, colonial confrontation and return to the source are his main genres of African films. The first two categories tend to tackle contemporary issues and historical colonial encounters in Africa respectively. The third group comprises films which tend to re-live the uncolonised Africa. The oral tradition, a main feature of this “return-to-the-source” lifestyle is quite crucial in this genre. This necessarily incorporates the didactic angle initially held by the oral art forms into the produced films.

Preference of the return-to-the-source genre enables a film-maker “to be less overt with the political message in order to avoid censorship” Diawara (1992, p.160). The thrust of traditional oral stories was to encourage members of the society to cultivate positive social morals. Message films have this moral obligation. They tend to cultivate a positive world view that shuns vices and/or permits fertile ground for cultural as well as socio-economic development in the target society. Looking at film as a medium that combines the instructional role of several social institutions, Garth (1980) say,

The movies are able to by-pass the traditional socializing agencies in our society such as the school, the church and parents and establish direct contact with the individual. Of course, we know that whatever response is made to the ‘message’ of the movies will be in accordance with the previous experiences of the individual, which takes into account the influence of these traditional social and cultural influences. (Garth, 1980, p. 73)

The film-maker has an obligation to shun the evils in the society. In hiding behind the oral tradition, he enjoys a safe zone, which the government of the day does not suspect any ill can come from; only wisdom, if not mere entertainment.¹⁰ African cineastes successfully explored this genre to present socially important messages. A good example is Gaston Kabore’s *Wend Kuuni*, which ably informs its viewers of the need for women to fight for their rights, infusing the message into a popular oral narrative. Kabore, speaking about his motivation to use return-to-the-source mode, says,

I wrote *Wend Kuuni* in the form of a traditional tale. I wanted the most popular indigenous narrative mode and cinematographic narrative to mutually fertilise each other, to create something that draws strength from one or the other. I believed that it was (...) a new cinematographic narrative. I stayed with this idea since then. My other films like *Rabi* (...) *Buud Yam*, my last film made in 1997, continue to draw their foundation from this cinematographic approach

(Kabore, 2000, p. 34).

In recent times, modern creative art forms including literature, radio and cinema have continued to encapsulate messages/information with entertainment. The most outstanding characteristics of this coating are language choice and spectacle. Simple, audience-friendly language or dialects are chosen for particular target audiences. Film-makers have, time and again, invoked the sentiments of Wa’Thiong’o (1986) relation of the use of a language and the culture it transmits in the process of its use. Njogu (2005, p. 56) finds in radio soaps what this study believes drives African cinematic productions: “the ability to captivate the audience, retention of the audience and transfer of information or cognitive experience to the audience.” These three re-affirm what other researchers believe is the cost of art production in Africa.¹¹ African film-makers, in “returning-to-the source,” as described by Diawara (1992), or drawing from the traditional oral art forms according to Kabore (2000),

frequently, implore the significance of language in culture, a feature that strongly typifies African oral tradition. Films such as Wanjiru Kinyanjui's *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* (1995), Anne Mungai's *Saikati* (1992), Sao Gamba's *Kolormask* (1986) are among the Kenya films which resort to code mixing between English and local Kenyan languages in their bid to appeal more strongly to the Kenyan audiences. This quest for relevance in postcolonial films is necessitated by "a profound feeling that a radical break with the past was (*sic*) occurring" (Anderson, 2003, p.193). Thus, the film-makers make a conscious move towards the exhumation of a culture facing the threat of oblivion, a culture which once regularised life in their communities.¹²

5. African film drawing from orature's rich cultural repertoire to instruct

Thomas Sankara, a former head of State for Burkina Faso, once described the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), a major film festival in the continent, as "the reflection of the most complete dialogue between African cultures." (Diawara, 1992, p. 137). The festival showcases films from all over the continent. Each region brings to the festival newer cultural developments biannually. This brings cinema's role in the continent even closer to that of the oral performance. Film festivals that have sprung up in the post-independent Africa like FESPACO, Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF), Kenya International Film Festival Cape town World Cinema Festival (SITHENGI) and many others can now be favourably compared to what Wa'Thiong'o (1986), p. 37 refers to as "the empty space" where different cultural exhibitions and conversations take place. In cultural exhibition, carefully thought out social and political problems are turned into cultural events through film for the viewers to see and ponder over.

Murphy (2000, p.4) reminisces that "a critic, Serge Daney (1979) has claimed, a certain Western critic had been vaguely expecting African cinema to be some "non-intellectual, all-singing all-dancing extravaganza." For such a critic, film is meant to reflect the culture of the society that produces it. Indeed, as Timothy Corrigan (2001, pp. 7–8) posits, one of the main aims of film criticism is to "make connections between a movie and other areas of culture in order to illuminate both the culture and the movies it produces." Daney may have missed the point in his exaggerated expectation of African cinema, yet he has a point in expecting a cinema that reflects—what to him is—all that goes on in Africa.¹³

In the performance of African oral art forms, a combination of devices such as proverbs, chants, dance, music, enactment, among others mutually coexist in a single space and time. This multiplicity of performances was employed in order for the different performances to complement each other in instructing the society. In any form of education, use of different approaches not only breaks monotony—hence retaining the learners' attention—but also ensures that the information is transferred through one method if not the other. African films have incorporated this approach in instructing the contemporary society. As a way of emphasising African oral culture different forms of narration, idiolect dialogue and subtitles to translate the language are used (Kabore, 2000). This approach renders culture the means of communication as well as the content of communication in a film such as *Kolormask*. Unlike in the Western films, which use a single meta-narrator to tell the story, African films tend to advance storylines using a variety of different characters.¹⁴

Kolormask exemplifies African films which are highly influenced by the traditional African which were communal and usually invoked the active participation of all in the community. Both performers and the audience shared a stage in a manner that when now reviewed in film, may seem stylised and exotic to the Western communities from which film was invented. To an African viewer, however, it is a nostalgic reflection of the indigenous African lifestyle. While Daney expects African film to be "non-intellectual, all-singing, all-dancing extravaganza", it is important to realise that this tradition was not a mere entertainment or extravaganza. In essence, it was embedded on among others, the pedagogical aspect that has continued to linger in African films well into independence. Postcolonialists find in the cultural products being created after the colonial contact, vestiges of the pre-colonial art forms of the colonised which exist as hybridised or hegemonic responses to the relations and situations that followed the colonial contact. To Murphy (2000), "the Western critic must

be sensitive to differing cultural values when dealing with African culture.” To me, African cinema occupies a big portion of what Murphy calls “African culture.” By extension, then, African cinema is included in his position.

Taking advantage of the technological advantages of film, spectacle is an important aspect in African theatre whose understanding has been modified in African film. The idea of the long shots commonly used in African films like *Saikati* (1992) and *Kolormask* could mean a technical fault as much as it could mean that the director is telling a story from the omniscient narrator’s point of view whereby he sees everything, hence no need for specific focuses (Diawara, 1992, p. 202). On another level, the shots accentuate the communal spatial organisation in the pre-colonial life in Africa. Thackway (2002, p. 232) posits that in African films, this kind of shot “recreates the kind of communal performance space characteristic of traditional outdoor theatre in (...) Africa.” This spectacularly conveys the communism represented by the communal nature of indigenous performances in African communities. Such camera set-ups are stylistically opposed to the Western framing which predominantly invoke extreme close-up, close-up, over-the-shoulder and medium shots with rare long shots.

6. Structural continuities in traditional tale and didactic film in Africa

The allegorical use of the tale structure in message films in Africa emanates to a large extent, from the metaphorical instructional function of the two modes of expression; film and the tale. Centrality of the narrator and film director are evident as the plots unfold. Among other African films, this aspect is clear in Dani Kouyate’s *Keita! L’heritage` du Griot* and *Sara*, an animated didactic film adapted from a children’s comic book. *Sara* employs a traditional story telling style to educate children on various concerns.

Nigerian and Ghanaian films are quite popular in most of Anglophone Africa. The films have been criticised to be structurally weak as they drag unnecessarily into several sequels. However, they continue to attract larger audiences in Africa. The loose structure is facilitated by extended explanations coupled with elaborate flashbacks, which make the ultimate running time unbearably long. This stems from the traditional African storytelling method of building the conflict slowly and getting into lengthy details, leaving little room for inference. In Kenya, *Saikati* heavily borrows from this tradition. Film being an expensive medium may not give room for such explanations since the length of a film has a direct implication on its production cost. When the idea of a sequel is not considered in the initial production budget, many times—as is the case with *Saikati*—lead actors change. Sometimes, locations and some props change as well, affecting the film negatively. Nevertheless, the didactic nature of a film like *Saikati* calls for a level of deep explanations. The target audience, producers and the director’s subconscious re-visit of the tale structure make it difficult for the films to completely run away from the extended plots.

In African cinema, film-makers explore different ways of captivating their audiences. A film-maker’s psychological and social backgrounds, gender, among other factors, play significant roles in his process of attempting to create meaning. Even to the film consumer, the situation is not different. Some of the best criticisms of Souleymane Cisse’s *Yeelen* (1987) for example, would be expected to come from the Bambara elders or better still, members of the *Komo*—a secret society among the Bambara in Mali and Sudan around whom the story superficially revolve—for they fully understand the culture in which the film is set. Yet, if for a moment, we were to excuse the authorial intentional fallacy; it becomes disturbing to hear Cisse say that *Yeelen* was his most successfully rendered political film that criticised the contemporary Malian political status. At a deeper level, a good grasp of the political atmosphere of this film’s setting or production becomes more useful for its consumer, perhaps much more than familiarising oneself with its space-bound cultural outfit. It is not a basic requirement for one to be an insider or an outsider for one to comprehend a cultural artefact at a critical level. *Yeelen*, employs the tale structure in order to draw the society’s attention to the political ills of post-independent government in Mali.

This resonates Sembene Ousmane's rather unusual association of *Xala* with political regime in the post-independent Senegal. *Xala* (1974) richly presents a political agenda, criticising the corrupt Senegalese post-independence state leaders. This is coated in the society's oral tradition, a cultural belief in a condition known as *Xala*, a curse which renders men impotent, which befalls El Hadji on the eve of his wedding to his third wife. The embarrassment and the turmoil he goes through trying to regain his manhood compares to the socio-economic stalemate in the society occasioned by the new leaders' (including El Hadji) misappropriation of the state's resources. The film is not an overt and simplistic attack on the leaders but a well calculated exploration of the vice the popular folk belief in the curse. A literal viewer easily fails to grasp the symbolic presentation. In a film and literary colloquium held during the 9th FESPACO in 1985, it emerged that the attempt to adapt Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1973) and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1984) to film relatively failed much more compared to the success of films such as *Wend Kuuni* (1983) and *Nelisita* (1984) which are films based on the oral tradition. Many successful African classics have borrowed immensely from the oral traditions of the African communities that produced them in order to entice the audience with the familiar.

7. The impact of third cinema on African film

As a part of a global cinematic movement that captured much of the third world, African cinema finds itself in sync with alternative cinema cultures such as postcolonial cinemas, which closely identify with Octavio Gatino and Fernando Solanas' Third Cinema, Julio G. Espinosa's Imperfect Cinema, Ruby Rich's Queer Cinema and Glauber Rocha's Cinema Novo. The movements mainly strove to give an alternative view of the more established mainstream cinemas.

Of all the above, third cinema had a more direct influence on the didactic mode found in African message films today. The movement encompasses a set of principles designed initially by the theory and films produced in the 1960s. The proponents classified world cinema into three rather silent yet distinct categories of first cinema, comprising Hollywood films which were basically industrial and commercial. This feature made Hollywood go to great extents to entice their audiences with exotic stories in order to increase ticket sales. Second cinema included the European entertainment comprising the *Avant Garde* cinema and *auteur* films. Emerging later, third cinema, was the cinema of resistance, addressing such conflicts as class conflict which later on took a racial dimension. Much of critical African cinema took the approach of third cinema as the rise of African film-makers from the 1960s coincided with the height of the fight for a liberated space both politically and culturally at the time when this movement was just being unveiled.

The cinema that emanated from this need for cultural and political emancipation had to be loaded with pedagogical messages that would inform not only the oppressed of his predicament and the need to move out of it, but would also tell the 'oppressor,' about the misconceptions delivered to him via the several cultural artefacts from both early voyageurs and colonial artists operating within first and second cinema. The cinema worked towards contesting mediated images of Africa from the Western cinemas and television newscasts.

African film-makers had a similar uphill task of correcting the distortions of a continent, previously blown out of proportion by their Western counterparts.¹⁵ This explains why most early African film-makers created narratives around historical figures and events strengthening Diawara's (1992) classification of African films. This formed the bulk of most early African films. Some of the films directly associated with this movement include Ousmane Sembene's *Emitai* (1971) and *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), Lakhdar Haminah's *Chronique des années de braise* (1975) and Rachida Krim's *Sous les pieds des femmes* (1997) among others. Some of these films focus majorly on the film-makers' contestation or questioning of the European versions of what Africa is. The films question the authenticity of the European stories about Africa, setting a strong pace for message film-making in Africa.

8. Conclusion

In summary, the paper's main crux is that "issue based" entertainment was in existence in Africa long before the colonial encounter. Yet, the colonial process gave it another dimension using the new medium of film. The information was carefully encapsulated in orature, which included individual performances as well as communal rites of passage that characterise most African traditional cultures.

Oral cultures store knowledge in the popular communal memory while literate cultures, stressing the visual, encode theirs in written and recording and retrieval technologies. The encounter between these two has resulted in a mix which favours the dominance of the technological. Film-makers in Africa therefore emerge as cultural intermediaries between the two media of expression.

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Notes

1. Samuel Johnson viewed fiction as didactic, at least in part. He singled out "the young, the ignorant and the idle" as the ones who familiar stories usually instruct on conduct and introductions to life.
2. Quoted in Smyth (1979, p. 347).
3. Crown Film Unit was an organisation within the British government's Ministry of Information during Second World War. At first, it was known as the General Post Office (GPO) film unit but it became the Crown Film Unit in 1940. It made short information films, documentaries, longer docu-dramas and few feature films for the general public in Britain and abroad.
4. Such an impact is recognised in Ghana where the CFU initiated a film school in Accra. The school had encouraging results as African students were trained to become assistants to the production teams. The Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC), established after the country's independence from Britain in 1957 emerged as an offspring of the old Gold Coast Film Unit formed in 1948 by the British as an extension of the Colonial Information Service. These together with Kwame Nkuruma's regime's support to the film industry gave Ghana a steady background to the strong audio-visual culture it exhibits today.
5. Jean Rouch. Quoted in Diawara, 1992.
6. Sellers did not want an African advising on this as he argued that such an African was likely to be an elite whose views would be out of touch with the realities that exist among the illiterate Africans for whom the instructional films were made.
7. Western domination of African film distribution owes a lot to the colonial period when the two major distributors were Gaumont for the French colonies and Rank for the British colonies. In early 1960s, shortly after most African countries got independence, intermediary film distributing companies, Compagnie Africaine Cinématographique Industrielle et Commerciale (COMACICO) and Société d'exploitation Cinématographique Africaine (SECMA) distributed for

Francophone countries while the AMPECA distributed films in Anglophone Africa. This saw the United States of America replace Britain as the main supplier of films in Anglophone Africa.

8. Having researched and published in orature in Kenya, her understanding of a tale narrator's work is above that of a common consumer of the orature in the society.
9. The centre was to produce feature films as well; hence its focus was not just on the instructional and educational films.
10. The other two reasons he gives are to search for indigenous African traditions that can assist in resolving the current social problems encountered in Africa and to create an alternative film language (p. 160).
11. Apart from these three forms, this has been found to be the case with African literature.
12. Spectacle is discussed under the next sub-topic.
13. This is totally another debate that stretches beyond the perimeters of this study. A further study of this topic involves a deeper postcolonial understanding of the Western critics' gaze on African culture and its products.
14. Proverbs (as is the case in most West African films) and other performances can sometimes be over-emphasised such that they operate as independent entities.
15. Several African film-makers attest to this as one of their roles. This is well discussed in Diang'a (2007), Mukora (2003).

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