

HIP HOP POLITICS: AGITATION THROUGH FILM AND MUSIC IN WEST AFRICA

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This paper discusses the revolutionary role of the arts, music (reggae and Hip Hop), cinema and new social media (Facebook and text messaging), in recent political debates and youth movements in Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as Nigeria.

The documentary films of the Senegalese rapper Didier Awadi mobilize a new generation of African youth for political action. While previous generations of West African filmmakers contributed to the debates on the postcolony through socio-political allegories of visual storytelling, Awadi's films, *The Lion's Point of View* (2011) and *Les Etats-Unis d'Afrique: Au-delà de Hip Hop* (2012), use reggae-inflected Hip Hop soundtracks to punctuate their message via journalistic imagery, mixing news clips with archival footages and music video-style segments. Awadi and fellow musicians, such as the Burkinabé Smockey (Serge Bambara) and Sams'k Le Jah of the liberation movement *Le Balai Citoyen* or the American rapper M1, present a Pan-Africanist vision for the future while also expressing their disappointment with the state of Africa fifty years after in-/dependence. They challenge their audiences to see the history of West Africa from the "lion's point of view." They revive the images and messages of martyred "African presidents," such as Thomas Sankara, by cutting historical footages into the narrative to address the new "génération consciente."

In Burkina Faso, the uprising of October 2014 was enacted in the name of Thomas Sankara, the events initiated and enacted by a movement led by two musicians, the rapper Smockey and the reggae artist and radio DJ Sams'K le Jah. They founded *Le Balai Citoyen* a social protest movement June 29, 2013 that culminated in the stepping down of the president Blaise Compaore who was also implicated in the assassination of Thomas Sankara. *Le Balai Citoyen* fashioned itself after the Senegalese rap movement *Y'en a Marre* that was started in January 2011 by a group of rappers with the leadership of singer Djily Bagdad. *Y'en a Marre* successfully blocked the dictatorial efforts of then president Abdoulaye Wade to run for a third

term in 2012. The human rights group and annual film festival *Ciné Droit Libre* founded in Burkina Faso has been actively following revolutionary events in the region since 2013 by filming the protests and posting them on Facebook and on YouTube.

The Ivorian Hip Hop artist Billy Billy, who sings in Nouchi, said in an interview before his concert in Ouagadougou in 2013: “Je suis un révolutionnaire, pas un griot!” [I am a revolutionary, not a griot!]. He uses rap as a weapon to raise African consciousness in the new generation. It is through the familiar language of his peers that he exposes the flaws of post-independence West African societies. His choice of Nouchi, the urban youth language of Abidjan, allows for trans-ethnic though not inter-generational communication. The new generation uses Hip Hop, alongside reggae, to mobilize the youth to free the continent of ethnic tensions and corrupt leaders.

The Nigerian feature film, *Confusion Na Wa* (2013), imitates the pace and action-packed storyline of Nollywood films, but Kenneth Gyang’s award-winning first film produced by his production company Cinema Kpatakpata subversively mimics and challenges the visual tropes and escapist storytelling of Nollywood that Wole Soyinka redubbed as “African Magic.”

“Mobilizing the Archive in Africa: Visual Archives, Historical Consciousness and Political Action,” was the title of a discussion panel at the 6th European Conference on African Studies held in Paris, July 2015. The use of the term “visual archives” poignantly describes recent political movements that combine three important entities: the power of images and sound, the scarce availability of historical archival materials that did not support colonial interests, and the recent resurgence of youth political movements that rely on new technologies, such as the internet, social media, and the activist spaces of film festivals and musical performances for collective mobilization. For example *Ciné Droit Libre* festival that concluded its 11th annual edition in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in June 2015, makes it its mission “to promote and defend human rights and freedom of expression through film.”¹ It opened with the screening of the film *Une révolution africaine: les dix jours qui ont fait chuter Blaise Compaoré*

¹ See: <http://festivalcinedroitlibre.blogspot.com/>

that documents the October revolution of 2014 in Burkina Faso.² Its keynote speakers included well-known musicians, such as Didier Awadi, Smockey, and Alif Naaba, among others. In West Africa the fusion of political activism, moving images, and popular music has been fore-fronted the last two decades, taking the lead from career politicians or cineastes of the Independence generation who helped, intellectually and physically, to sever ties with their former colonial occupiers.

The Senegalese rap artist and political activist Didier Awadi started his musical career with *Positive Black Soul*, the Hip Hop group that vocalized the concerns of a new post-Independence generation. For example, the group provided the sound track for a short film entitled “Mon Frere” concerning the effects of HIV/AIDS on families, directed by the Malian filmmaker Cheik Oumar Sissoko for Global Dialogues in 2001.³ It was not till a decade later that Awadi made his own feature-length documentary film *Le point de vue du lion* [The Lion’s Point of View] that presents a bitter critique of the state of Africa 50 years after in-/dependence – to the soundtrack of African Hip Hop and reggae.⁴ Awadi challenges his audience to see the history of West Africa from the “lion’s point of view, as opposed to the hunter’s.” Moreover, he warns the viewers not to expect a film with the cinematic magic of a Steven Spielberg or Spike Lee. He opens the film with a series of news footages that report on West African would-be immigrants on over-packed rafts off the shores of Spain who are brutally handled by immigration officials once on land. The film then continues with historical and contemporary interviews that project a more optimistic vision for the next 50 years.

In response to previous generations of artists, Awadi’s music and films continue to forefront the human cast-offs of society, also prominently featured in Ousmane Sembene’s films and what the critic Kenneth Harrow identifies as the symbolism of “trash” in his *Trash African Cinema from Below* (2013: 10). Harrow appropriates Robert Stam’s “cinema of garbage” of Brazilian Third Cinema that echoes Fanon’s “wretched of the earth” or Aime Cesaire’s notion of

² See: <http://wakatinfo.over-blog.com/2015/06/projection-sur-les-dix-jours-qui-ont-fait-chuter-blaise-compaore.html>.

³ Sissako, Cheik Oumar, Dir. “Mon Frere” (Global Dialogues). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOdzS4LmOh0> Web. 30 June 2015.

⁴ Awadi, Didier. *The Lion’s Point of View*. Dakar, Senegal: Studio Sankara, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZH-LoLzJ-w> Web. 30 June 2015.

“thingification” to address the dehumanizing effects of colonization. For example, Cheick Oumar Sissako’s film *Nyamanton – The Garbage Boys* (Mali 1986) also draws on parallels between waste and lost human potential: the film features young school children who collect garbage in order to pay for their own school desks and supplies. Similarly, in *The Lion’s Point of View* Awadi draws attention to the tragedy of African immigrants’ bodies washing up on the shores of Europe – a Middle Passage in reverse. To counter-balance human potential wasted in the dump or bodies sunk to the bottom of the sea, he features positive precedents of African leadership and history.

Awadi’s most recent documentary film entitled *Les Etats-Unis d’Afrique: Au-delà de Hip Hop* [The United States of Africa: Beyond Hip Hop] (filmed by Yanick Létourneau) follows the rapper on his travels from Dakar to Paris, to Ouagadougou and Washington DC, during the making of the Hip Hop album “Presidents of Africa” (Senegal 2010). The film calls on a new generation of African youth, whom Awadi addresses as “génération consciente” on his latest CD entitled *Ma revolution* (2013). In search of archival footages of the speeches of African leaders and revolutionaries, Awadi has to travel from West Africa to France to find records of African resistance and leadership, even if in censored and truncated forms. His mission is to find, preserve, record and celebrate – to archive an Africa-centric notion of history. Awadi’s music and documentary films must fill the gaps left by colonial historical censors concerning such events as the assassinations of Patrice Lumumba or Thomas Sankara. Film and music stand in for traditional Euro-centric written archives.

The film “The United States of Africa” opens with the image of a garbage dump, which also serves as the final resting place of the Burkinabe revolutionary Thomas Sankara in the Dagnon section of Ouagadougou. Images of trash and pollution haunt the film: dump and cemetery, trash and the interred body of the murdered revolutionary, ignite the passionate plea by Awadi and the Burkinabè rap artist Smockey (Serge Bambara) to wake the new generation to reclaim their heroes and inspire them to action. Earlier generations of filmmakers, such as Ousmane Sembene, Djibril Diop Mambéty, Jean-Pierre Bekolo and Jean-Marie Tano have used film to agitate, while the Hip Hop generation has also embraced music for activism to reclaim their “African Renaissance.” Awadi and Smockey rap to images of garbage and pollution overtaking the African continent to mobilize the youth. In their search for heroes, Awadi and Smockey

recall an array of African and African diaspora leaders who still inspire, among them Thomas Sankara, the murdered president of Burkina Faso whose brief leadership from 1983 till 1987 promoted economic self-reliance and demanded that the West forgive the country's debt in lieu of self-serving feel-good charity.

The October 30th, 2014 uprising in Burkina Faso evoked the legacy of Sankara and was led by the rapper Smockey and the reggae artist Smas'K le Jah.⁵ They founded the *Balai Citoyen* movement the summer of 2013 that culminated in the stepping down of the former president Blaise Compaore. The immediate goal of *Le Balai Citoyen* was to prevent Compaore from changing the constitution to stay in power, again, after 27 years of autocratic rule. The events of October 30th and 31st went beyond the immediate goals of *Le Balai Citoyen*, leaving the country in a power hiatus that led to a brief military take-over by General Honoré Nabéré Traoré. Eventually, the ex-diplomat Michel Kafando was named interim president with the head of the presidential guard Yacouba Isaac Zida as Prime Minister. Compaore and his family escaped to Côte d'Ivoire where they still reside. Over the years, Thomas Sankara's name and youthful image inspired the Hip Hop generation, even though many public figures (the rapper Black So Man⁶ and the journalist Norbert Zongo⁷, to name only two) were assassinated for demanding the

⁵ Other Burkinabe reggae musicians: Sana Bob, Jah Verity, and Bingui Jah Jammy. Sana Bob often represents himself on CD covers or posters holding a loudspeaker, as if mediating but also elevating the volume and sound of the youth majority. For image of Sana Bob with loudspeaker, see his song "Mon pays" on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsBokL8buvY>

Jah Verity, "Ma Patrie" on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-3YyIoEsnI>

⁶ The artist Black So Man (Bintogoma Traoré) was assassinated for his outspoken lyrics and music, such as the songs entitled: "Libertès confisquées" [Confiscated Freedoms]; or "J'étais au process" ["I was at the Trial"— in which he accuses Compaore with crimes of encroachment on democracy]. In the song, "Le system du vampire" [The System of Vampire] from his only album *Tout le monde et personne* [Everyone and Anyone] (1994) condemns corruption in the government. Black So Man was seriously injured in a traffic accident in December 1997, said to be an assassination attempt. He fled to Côte d'Ivoire and later, in 2002, died from complications of his previous accident.

Black So Man, "Libertès confisquées", see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeS2EbFvofE;>

"J'étais au process", see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oEd0RLT998;> and "Le system du vampire", see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95U6lihCol8.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95U6lihCol8)

⁷ Norbert Zongo was killed on December 13th 1998, his burned body found next to his vehicle near Sapouy, a small community about 100 kms south of the capital Ouagadougou. The singer Alpha Blondy of Côte d'Ivoire commemorated the 10th anniversary of Zongo's death in the song, "Journalistes en danger" [Journalists in Danger], about the assassination of Norbert Zongo. See also, Alpha Blondy, "Journalistes en danger", on the album *Elohim* (1999). See: <http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/music/genre-wm/african-pop/journalistes-en-danger-wm/>

disclosure of the circumstances of Sankara's death.⁸ Despite the danger involved in evoking Thomas Sankara's legacy, the new generation, those in their twenties and thirties, have chosen him as their role model.⁹

Thomas Sankara stood up to Western politicians, most memorably to François Mitterand during Mitterand's visit to Burkina Faso in November 1986. Sankara closed his welcome speech that critiqued France's continued colonial influence in Africa with his signature Pan-Africanist revolutionary phrase: "Homeland or death, we shall overcome!" [*La patrie ou la mort, nous vaincrons!*].¹⁰ A year later in 1987 in Addis Abäba at the meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), he made the call to all African countries to join him in refusing to pay their debts to the West and void all African debt. He predicted his early demise, stating that if he and Burkina Faso would stand alone in their demand, he would not be at the next OAU meeting, a prophecy that came to truth through the coordinated efforts by France and the US who used Blaise Compaore to eliminate Sankara and his revolutionary leadership. The biopic about him *Thomas Sankara: The Upright Man* by Robin Shuffield served as a record of his presidency for a generation of Burkinabe and West African youth who had no access to footages of him.¹¹ During his presidency, Sankara encouraged the participation and leadership of women in politics and high-level governmental positions; banned the use of imported Mercedes Benz cars by

⁸ On December 13th each year, all students, from elementary school through university, go on strike running out of their classrooms with fists in the air yelling "Liberté / Freedom" in memory of Norbert Zongo and Black So Man.

⁹ There are several songs, mostly Hip Hop and reggae, dedicated to Thomas Sankara: by Alpha Blondy ("Capitain Thomas Sankara," *Jah Victory* 2008): Alpha Blondy, "Capitain Thomas Sankara" on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trq6nl9Xai8>; Burkinabé reggae musician Sams'k Le Jah ("Thomas Sankara – Hommage"⁹); and Smockey and Didier Awadi ("Président Thomas Sankara": Smockey and Didier Awadi, "Président Thomas Sankara" on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_XceuNHm6g; and Didier Awadi, *Prèsidents d'Afrique*, 2010). But there is also a traditional song of Sankara by Nahawa Doumbia (Malian traditional singer) and by Senegalese singer Cheikh Lô: Nahawa Doumbia, "Thomas Sankara" on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4R7qchEyY20>

Cheikh Lô, "Sankara" on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHiwAthUtP4>.

¹⁰ See footage of the exchange between François Mitterand and Thomas Sankara on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18AoRhBos4g>; or read a transcript of it at the Thomas Sankara website:

<http://www.thomassankara.net/spip.php?article32&lang=fr>.

¹¹ A rare link to a contemporary archival footage on Thomas Sankara (1984), see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF-otRbvUc>

officials; built affordable housing units for civil servants (*Logement 1200* in Secteur 14 of Ouagadougou); laid down railroads for intra-African commerce; and established reservoirs for rice and fish production to feed his nation. In just four years, from 1983 to 1987, Burkina Faso went from one of the poorest nations that relied on imported food to one that could feed its citizens, and more, exporting its high-quality grains and cotton abroad.

Blaise Compaore was one of many African leaders who turned anti-colonial radicalism into dictatorial rule and refused to leave office. In neighboring Côte d'Ivoire the decade-long civil war, since 1999 till the 2010 elections, was powerfully recorded by Ivorian reggae singer Tiken Jah Fakoly in the song "Quitte le pouvoir" [Get out of office] on his album *Coup de Gueule* (2004) [Coup of Silencing]. In an interview with Daniel B. Reed, Tiken Jah explains the appeal of reggae music: "Reggae is a militant music. It's the music of those without means. It's the music of opinions. . . . it is a music that is the soul of the poor" (Reed in Charry, ed. 2011: 96).¹² The song gained special significance when Tiken Jah Fakoly, who now lives in Bamako, Mali performed it with Didier Awadi in Dakar in 2009 to mobilize the youth in a televised concert to remove the two-term Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade.¹³

It has been argued that there is a linkage between African American Hip Hop and West African griot traditions. African American rappers are often called "modern griots," a concept popularized by the success of Alex Haley's 1976 book *Roots* and the subsequent television miniseries based on his book (Tang in Charry, ed. 2011: 81).¹⁴ Furthermore, African filmmakers such as the Senegalese Ousmane Sembène have been called "modern griots" or "screen griots" who connect "orature" with film" (Thackway 2003: 49-92). But, the romanticized notion of Hip Hop artists as "modern griots" is perceived as a particularly American construct and is often

¹² Reed comments: "Fakoly was but one of the several reggae musicians, including his Ivorian reggae forebears Alpha Blondy and Serges Kassy, who defined reggae in the Ivorian context as *the* primary music of rebellion and political protest in the 1990s" (Reed 97).

¹³ Tiken Jah Fakoly and Didier Awadi, "Quitte le pouvoir" on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y7Y2UqgckY>

¹⁴ As ethnomusicologist Patricia Tang observes, "Griots have played a significant role in cultures throughout West Africa for more than seven centuries, serving as oral historians, praise singers, musicians, genealogists, and storytellers. Best known as hereditary artisans of the spoken word, griots also specialize in a variety of musical instruments, from the kora and balafon of Mande griots (*jali*) to the sabar drum of Wolof griots (*gèwël*) in Senegal" (Tang 79-80).

contested by African musicians. For example, in an interview Didier Awadi emphasized the difference between modern artists and griots:

What we rappers have continued to do, what we have taken from the griots, is from the journalistic side. A journalist engaged in his society. But all of the other aspects of the griot, we don't do. That is, we don't sing for the purpose of receiving money. ... The rapper is like a sentinel for society saying what works or what doesn't work. (Tang in Charry, ed. 2011: 84)

Such emphasis on the activist journalistic side of music, to inform and to agitate, makes it clear why Burkinabè youth today fashion their role models after the revolutionary Thomas Sankara, the journalist Norbert Zongo, or the singer Black So Man—all three murdered by Compaoré and his posse.

The Ivorian rapper Billy Billy, who sings in Nouchi (the youth dialect in Abidjan, of Creolized French with Jula and Susu words), said before a concert in Ouagadougou in 2013: “Je suis un révolutionnaire, pas un griot!” [I am a revolutionary, not a griot!].¹⁵ He uses rap as a weapon to raise African consciousness in the new generation. It is through familiar language that he exposes the flaws of African society. His choice of Nouchi, the urban youth language of Abidjan, allows for trans-ethnic communication. Nouchi and Hip Hop give voice to a new generation. In his music video, “Dioula a pris coupé” [the Dioula language was cut], Billy Billy has a cartoon character carry a sign that says, the “SOLUTION (to the current social problems in Côte d’Ivoire is)” “BILLY BILLY (for) PRESIDENT.” Billy Billy made the animated musical video lampooning the selling out of local culture by those in power, among them corrupt politicians, elders, and *marabouts*. Instead, the rapper champions “DIOULA PISSANCI” [“dioula puissance” or Jula power] through the musical form of Hip Hop to deliver his anti-establishment message. Billy Billy combines political activism with music and the popular

¹⁵ See Billy Billy’s press release for his upcoming performance at *Waga Hip Hop* in Burkina Faso, October 18th 2013: “Billy Billy n’est plus à présenter! Il est « le » rappeur ivoirien du moment et plus que ça: un artiste complet engagé au développement de la démocratie dans son pays et en Afrique. Billy Billy annonce clairement la couleur: “*Je suis un révolutionnaire, pas un griot!*” [emphasis is mine]. Avec sa musique percutante aux paroles simples, incisives et « ivoirisées », Billy Billy donne tout son sens au rap africain et éveille les consciences. « Il pratique un rap au style ethno moderne qui vient bouleverser les standards du Hip Hop ivoirien.” See: <http://www.institutfrancais-burkinafaso.com/programme/ouaga2013SeptembreOctobre.pdf> (retrieved August 7, 2013).

forms of cartoon and animation to get his message across, serving as visual and audial archives to convey and preserve his generation's message, through the youth dialect of Nouchi.

As the previous generations – in South Africa, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire – appropriated the universal liberation message and imagery of roots reggae music (the message of African nationalism and unity, dread-locks, Rastafarian spirituality) to transcend ethnic tensions, as Louis Chude-Sokei explains in *Global Reggae* (Chude-Sokei in Cooper, ed. 2012: 221-241), the new generation uses Hip Hop, alongside reggae, to mobilize the youth to free the continent of ethnic tensions and corrupt leaders.¹⁶ Thus the youth is mobilized through visual images in film and through revolutionary soundtracks. Roots reggae, before Hip Hop, entered Africa through the routes of the African diaspora. In Lisa McNee's assessment, African youth "simultaneously rebel against oppressive political systems and identify with the oppressed youth of the African Diaspora" (McNee in Young, ed. 2001: 213). In David William Spencer's assessment: "Reggae definitely has the ability to protest—and not simply to protest but also to offer solutions" (Spencer in Murrel, Spencer, and McFarlande, eds. 1998: 274). In its general mode, reggae incorporates sentiments of protest against local and global injustices. In her discussion on Alpha Blondy, Lisa McNee concludes:

Youth in francophone West Africa clearly do see themselves reflected in certain postcolonial evocations of Pan-Africanism, particularly those of reggae artists who present embattled postcolonial situations in music that does not simply represent the idea of resistance, but is a form of resistance itself . . . The identification of West African youth with reggae and Rastafarian ideals thus takes place through a double movement, one that is marked both by local concerns and by a specifically inflected cosmopolitanism (McNee in Young, ed. 2001: 232).

In Achille Mbembe's assessment, because the current generation "has no memory of colonization" and "does not recognize itself, either in the ideologies of a Négritude that it denounces, nor in those of an authenticity which it parodies in laughter and disdain" they turn to diasporic genres and make the music their own (Mbembe 7, cited in McNee in Young, ed. 2001: 232):

Most of the songs constitute in themselves appeals to justice, to equality, and to love. Sung in contexts where corruption, nepotism, injustice and arbitrariness are current, they are endowed with a power [to] protest that hardly escapes the

¹⁶ See Louis Chude-Sokei's discussion of the role reggae music plays on the African continent, in Cooper, ed. *Global Reggae*.

vigilance of the powers that be. (Mbembe 144-45, cited in McNee in Young, ed. 2001: 240)

Reggae and Hip Hop through the media of digital film and animated images carry the post-colonial message that also incorporates a unifying message for youth across ethnic, regional, religious, and linguistic lines. When asked in a recent interview, before events of October 30th and 31st, what was *Balai Citoyen*'s relationship to music – and one could add film and image – Smockey responded:

We use it to broadcast civic messages. It is easier with music [and images, my addition]. The *Balai Citoyen* unites all sorts of social categories, but some reknowned figures have carried the message: we are lucky to have famous artists like Basic Soul, one of the first rappers in Burkina Faso, like Sams'k le Jah [...] who is a reggae singer or like myself. Our faces are easily recognizable and allow us to broadcast our message to the people. They know us so they listen to us. (Marianne Sadier, October 1, 2014)¹⁷

The *Y'en a Marre* ["We're Fed Up. Enough is Enough"] movement was started in Senegal in January 2011 by a group of rappers with the leadership of singer Djily Bagdad. They successfully blocked the dictatorial efforts of their president Abdoulaye Wade to run for a third term in 2012; the song by Kilifeu, Simon et Xuman titled "Abdoulaye Faux! Pas Forcé" [Abdoulaye is false, do not force!] became the anthem of the movement.¹⁸ In Burkina, *Le Balai Citoyen* fashioned itself after the Senegalese rap movement. The human rights group and film festival *Ciné Droit Libre* have been following the events in Burkina since 2013 by filming the protests and posting them on Facebook and on YouTube.¹⁹ A decade ago, the Ivorian Tiken Jah

¹⁷ Sadier, Marianne, Interview with Smockey. *Africa Is a Country*, October 1, 2014. <http://africasacountry.com/the-citizens-of-burkina-faso/>

¹⁸ *Y'en a Marre* was formed in protest to president Abdoulaye Wade's bid for third term as president of Senegal:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/02/19/147113419/enough-is-enough-say-senegalese-rappers>

Songs of the movement:

"Against Impunity":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7I81EK-_JE

"Abdoulaye Faux! Pas Forcé"

<http://www.legrigriinternational.com/article-100-commentaires-senegal-music-abdoulaye-faux-pas-force-y-en-a-marre-99528656.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCuKAN-T0pk&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁹ The YouTube footages are available at the site's website and YouTube, recorded July 28th, 2013:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JirXB1q_Xvo#at=45

<http://droitlibre.tv/tv/film214>

Fakoly recorded the song “*Le Balayeur*” [The Sweeper] on his album *Françafrique* (2002).²⁰ The album’s motivation is summed up in Tiken Jah’s assessment of the sentiments of African youth back in 2002, a message still very relevant:

Nous, jeunes Africains, quand on voit des bases de l’armée française en Afrique après quarante ans d’indépendance, on est un peu agacés.

[When, we young Africans, still see French army bases in Africa, even after forty years of independence, we are a little annoyed.]

Thus, the work in the “postcolony” continues.

The recent Nigerian feature film, *Confusion Na Wa* [bad situation/surprise] (2013), imitates the pace and action-packed storyline of Nollywood films, but Kenneth Gyang’s award-winning first film produced by his production company Cinema Kpatakpata subversively mimics and challenges the visual tropes and escapist storytelling of Nollywood that Wole Soyinka redubbed as “African Magic.” The film reuses and coopts the tropes of Nollywood cinema where African animist traditions and Pentecostal Christianity mix in an uncanny assortment of sorcery and the creed of money in modern Nigeria. Charles Piot, in his *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*, has made a similar connection between the absurdity of modernity and the syncretic fusion of Pentecostal Christianity with animist magic in Togo. Gyang’s film exposes the surreality of such mixtures, and even though the film does not overtly express a political message, its comedic plot of errors that involves a stolen phone and a string of erroneous logic of causes-and-effects nevertheless comments on a new generation that tries to keep some decency in a world gone surreal.

Set in a Nigerian city, *Confusion Na Wa* is a dark comedy about a group of strangers whose fates become intertwined over the course of 24 hours. When the businessman Emeka drops his phone during a scuffle in traffic, it falls into the hands of a couple of slick Pidgin English-speaking hustlers, Charles and Chichi, who having read through its contents decide to blackmail its owner. Their misdemeanors set in motion a chain of events that leads to a shattering end. The film’s circular structure, used both by African oral culture and films, suggests that unless fundamental changes take place, the story will repeat. Gyang’s film comments on generational conflicts, extreme materialism, superstitions, adultery, rape, harsh societal take on

²⁰ Tiken Jah Fakoly, “Le Balayeur” on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsVdFw_3HWk

homosexuality, drug addictions, and labor conditions that diminish one's personhood and dignity. Instead of quoting African leaders, the film quotes the clichés of Hollywood, such as the blockbuster film and now musical, *The Lion King*, and its meaningless "hakuna matata" [no problem] mantra. According to Gyang there are many problems in modernizing Africa, an issue Charles Piot's recent book on Togo and the rise of Pentecostalism since the 1990s also addresses. While Piot reconciles Pentecostalism with modernization, Gyang offers a more nuanced picture that also takes the human casualties into consideration. The opening and closing scenes of the film, the repeated images of the mistaken death of the film's only decent character, brings to the forefront the price paid for unbridled modernization as culturally archived in Nollywood films, Nigeria's most lucrative products after oil.

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