

## Nigerian Video Film As Minor Transnational Practice

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Using the example of Nigerian video film, and building on the work of Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, I intend in this paper to discuss certain features of transnational cultural practice and to identify conditions that enable different types of transnational cultural practice for populations currently marginalized in the global economy. To be specific, this contribution to the larger discussion on globalization and culture will focus on the phenomenon described by Lionnet and Shih (5) as “minor transnationalism,” or as “vernacular globalization” by Arjun Appadurai (10). I am particularly interested in commercial forms of transnational cultural productivity. And I will argue here that, under certain conditions, such commercial forms offer greater opportunity for autonomous voices from globally minoritized populations to emerge, in dialogue with local publics, and outside the dominant centers of cultural production, than do the non-commercial forms of transnational cultural productivity. This remains true even though transnational cultural transmission of the non-commercial variety frequently occurs through artistic and intellectual circuits, largely animated by liberal agendas and progressive politics. It remains true though the circuits enabling global circulation of non-commercial creative works appear especially sensitive to the concerns of significant constituencies in the developing world.

Before going any further, I should like to state clearly that I do not consider commercial forms of minor transnational cultural productivity to be necessarily more vital or more relevant than non-commercial forms. In different ways, both types make a contribution to the political and artistic life of communities in the global South. However, the growing invisibility of autonomous local voices linked to local publics is as much a critical consequence of globalization in its dominant manifestations as the disappearance of cultural forms considered in some way traditional. Given this reality, minor transnational practices that appear to reverse or circumvent the trend are all the more noteworthy. Indeed, I would suggest that at a time of heightened commitment to the idea of universal rights and international standards, it becomes increasingly urgent to consider the extent to which the opinions of diverse local and regional publics factor into such definitions of the universal and international. It is therefore also important to consider whether opportunities actually exist that might provide greater prominence for autonomous voices specifically responsive to diverse local and regional publics as well as their agendas. I believe that

under very peculiar conditions which do not obtain everywhere in the world, such opportunities do sometimes come into existence as can be illustrated with Nigerian video film and its audiences. I would also argue that more attention needs to be paid to the kind of local and regional publics that sustain a practice like Nigerian video film, in elaborating on what might be contained under the rubric of the universal. Such considerations are also critical for defining what might be considered representative of communities and subjectivities in a contested location like Africa.

In speaking about the possible impact of globalization on world cultures, Frederic Jameson (64-66) distinguished in one of the early volumes on the subject between what he called the more and the less optimistic interpretations of globalization offered by scholarly observers. Some theorists, he noted, celebrated a new eclecticism and hybridity in cultural production around the world as different societies interacted with each other and borrowed from each other. Yet other theorists decried a growing standardization of cultural production as dominant centers flooded the world with their products and shut out less powerful voices. Jameson was, himself, clearly partial to the latter interpretation. In their more recent contribution to the discussion, Lionnet and Shih likewise acknowledge the tension between the “utopic and dystopic” (7) evaluations of the impact of globalization on cultural production. However, they also call for “an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries” (7). As they rightly point out, whether the emphasis is on the ability of dominant centers to dictate cultural trends, or on the determination of those at the margins to resist those trends, there is still a tendency in many discussions of globalization to posit dominant patterns of global cultural circulation and responses to those dominant patterns as the only forms of transnational cultural practice, while overlooking minor forms of transnational cultural production.

In selecting the term “minor” to qualify some transnational cultural flows, Lionnet and Shih build on the argument first made by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their work on Kafka, and later extended by Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd in their edited volume on minority discourses. Both of these earlier works highlight the oppositional, potentially radical, and collective dimension of minor literature. It is increasingly clear, though, that not all forms of transnational cultural flow emanating from minoritized groups today are invested in either resistance to, or assimilation within, majority cultures. As I intend to demonstrate shortly, Nigerian video film may be considered a particularly apt example of cultural production that is transnational in scope, that is aware of the trends emanating from the dominant centers in global cultural production, but remains detached from the dominant systems of global cultural production in significant respects.

Global cinema is, in any case, one of the most frequently invoked references in debates over the cultural impact of globalization. For now,

no term better captures the essence of the growing intersection between media technologies, narrative, and deterritorialized publics than Appadurai's neologism, "mediascapes." There is however, much less agreement on how to interpret the consequences of this development. Reporting for example, on how Hollywood films were affecting Latin American film production, Barbara Trent writes, "Directors in those countries are still making excellent films, but they are certainly not able to produce anything near what they are capable of because of the financial dominance that the Hollywood industry has over their countries" (232). To substantiate his own misgivings about free trade in cultural goods, Jameson too referred to global cinema in the same volume as Trent. He was particularly worried about American efforts in the 1990s to force some countries to remove subsidies extended to local cultural production. He warned that "success in this area would at once mean the tendential extinction of new national cultural and artistic production elsewhere, just as the free movement of American movies in the world spells the death knell of national cinemas elsewhere, perhaps of all other national cinemas as distinct species" (61).

Jameson's fears for the future of national cinemas are not without reasonable foundation. The situation appears particularly bleak in Europe where, according to John Hill (59), European cinema is in decline and Hollywood films completely dominate the box office. Tyler Cowen confirms both trends, that is, the decline of European cinema and the growing importance of Hollywood films in Europe, but unlike Jameson, he is a supporter of completely free trade in cultural goods, and he in fact holds state subsidies to local film production at least partly responsible for the decline in European cinema. Cowen argues that "[s]ubsidies encourage producers to serve domestic demand and the wishes of politicians and cinematic bureaucrats, rather than produce movies for international export. Many films will be made, even when they have little chance of turning a profit in stand-alone terms" (81). Indeed, Cowen's thesis in his book *Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures* is that globalization both destroys and creates new cultural forms. In the current global marketplace, according to Cowen, fully commercialized forms of cultural production like Indian and Hong Kong cinema will thrive, while government subsidized forms like European cinema are likely to be in retreat. To what extent is Cowen right, and more importantly, what does his argument about commercialization and globalization mean for cultural production in the poorer societies of the world? By way of response, I turn now to video film production in contemporary Nigeria.

### Nigerian Video Film

Production of feature films in video film format began in Nigeria only in the late 1980s. One estimate of total production based on submissions to the Nigerian Film Censors Board put annual video film production in

Nigeria in the mid-1990s at about 250 films (Adesanya 43). A more recent estimate also based on submissions to the Nigerian Film Censors Board found that by 2004 an average of 3 new films were being submitted every day and annual production had risen to at least a thousand films per annum (Barrot 12, 40). Since this figure does not take into consideration the films that are not submitted to the Censors Board, and since the Censors Board, like other Nigerian government parastatals, does not really have the means to fully monitor the activities supposedly within its purview, the total number of films produced in Nigeria is likely to be even higher. By any account, and using only the figures from the Nigerian Film Censors Board, this makes the Nigerian video film industry the largest film industry in Africa, and one of the largest in the world in terms of productivity.

This level of productivity is all the more remarkable when one considers two factors. The first is that most Nigerians have experienced a significant economic downturn since the end of the oil boom in the early 1980s in addition to periodic bouts of political upheaval and violence. It is against this background of declining purchasing power and economic opportunity that the video film industry came into existence and became a major source of revenue for those directly and indirectly involved with it. Secondly, and perhaps more critically, given the prior references to debates about globalization, it is important to know that Hollywood films are widely available in Nigerian urban centers. This fact has, however, not prevented the Nigerian video film industry, now popularly described as Nollywood, from increasing its output and extending its reach. Indeed, and because Nigeria is Africa's largest market for pirated goods (Larkin 297), pirated Hollywood movies imported from Asia are not only widely available, they are often cheaper than Nigerian video films in Nigerian markets. Indian and Hong Kong films are just as available and affordable in particular Nigerian locations for those who prefer this kind of film. This state of affairs raises many intriguing questions with implications for our understanding of contemporary manifestations of transnational cultural practice. How was a thriving film industry able to emerge without government subsidies and in a country with relatively low per capita income facing such severe economic crises? How was a thriving film industry able to emerge in this location given the widespread availability of cheaper and supposedly higher quality films from Hollywood, India and Hong Kong? And finally, to what extent does the productivity of this particular film industry represent a transnational cultural practice?

In response to the last question, let me start by affirming that the distribution of Nigerian video film is incontestably transnational. Nigerian video films are made in a variety of languages, principally at the moment in English, Yoruba, and Hausa. Even in indigenous languages, the films have a transnational radius of distribution. With respect to Yoruba and Hausa, speakers of both languages extend well beyond the borders of Nigeria, into Benin and Togo for Yoruba, into Niger and several other West African countries for Hausa. Nigerian video films in Yoruba and Hausa have become a popular source of entertainment for Yoruba and

Hausa speakers within and beyond the borders of Nigeria (Barrot 12; Larkin 302). The English language films have an even more extensive geographic reach within Nigeria itself and across the continent. Several publications in the past few years have reported on the presence and popularity of Nigerian video films in southern Africa, in east and central Africa as well as along the West African coast. Increasingly, these films are also to be found wherever there is a large African immigrant community around the world. Occasionally, the transnational dimension also makes itself felt in the very production of the films. As such, and in order to enhance sales in specific African countries and across the continent as a whole, some Nigerian video film directors have either co-opted non-Nigerian actors, and/or shot parts of the film in other African countries, including Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, South Africa, and the Congo, among others. And when opportunity permits, the setting selected for the film is actually outside Africa, with Britain and the United States being the most frequently used locations. Thus, and as indicated by its title, the highly successful comedy, *Osuofia in London*, was shot in the UK and Nigeria. Nkem Owoh, the star of *Osuofia in London*, then proceeded to apply the same plot to a new comedy with a West African regional focus, *Bonjour, Osuofia speaks French*, shot in Nigeria and Benin with dialogue in both French and English. The story in Tunde Kelani's *Àbèni* similarly unfolds in Benin and Nigeria, with actors from both countries speaking Yoruba and French. Shooting films in diverse African locations and using actors from other African countries appears to be a growing trend among successful directors of Nigerian video films.

The relative inaccessibility of the kind of infrastructure that sustains the dissemination of Hollywood films in the United States and much of the Western world is at least one factor that has worked in favor of the Nigerian video film industry. Cinemaplexes are rare and expensive for cinema fans in Nigerian cities. By contrast, an estimated 67% of homes in urban Nigeria own a VCR (Barrot 22). A viewer may be acutely aware of the difference in quality between an American film and a Nigerian video film when s/he has the opportunity of watching the film on the big screen with the sound and picture quality intact, but, when as is more likely in Nigeria, the viewer encounters the American film in pirated VHS, DVD, or VCD mode on home television, the difference in technical quality between an American and a Nigerian video film may not be quite so flagrant.

It is no accident, then, that this vibrant video film industry emerged in Nigeria, rather than say in South Africa where the infrastructure of film viewing is in conditions that are closer to the standards that obtain in the West, and where film viewing habits have been more significantly shaped by a certain quality of delivery linked to the relatively wide distribution of cinema theaters and cinemaplexes. Hollywood blockbusters no doubt benefit from the considerable financial investment that goes into the making of the films and the availability of an infrastructure of delivery that showcases the results of such investment. Without access to similar

levels of financial investment, European filmmakers find themselves at a disadvantage since the expectations of their audiences are very much informed by the quality of films they have grown accustomed to seeing in well-maintained cinema theaters.

In Nigeria and most other places in Africa, Nigerian video film confronts Hollywood films on a somewhat more level playing field when it comes to mode of access as one pirated form to another. In Larkin's words, "[w]atching . . . Hollywood or Indian films on VCRs in Nigeria, where there is no official distribution of nonpirate media, means necessarily watching the dub of a dub of a dub" (307). One could say that the rarity of a certain type of infrastructure of delivery actually works to deprive Hollywood films of their competitive edge in the area of technical superiority in some third world locations. Given the most common mode of delivery, it does not really matter that Nigerian video film directors do not have as much money to invest in their films as do American film directors. In the end, the technical quality of distinct films as accessed by the audience in a place like Nigeria is not vastly dissimilar.

The technology of video filmmaking is also lighter, cheaper, more user friendly, and less dependent on other kinds of expensive post-production facilities than celluloid filmmaking. Reproduction and distribution in VHS or VCD format are similarly affordable and relatively easy to master. From my informal observations, many of the persons I encountered operating and overseeing the reproduction of films in Nigeria and Ghana appeared to be high school dropouts or individuals with even lower levels of education. The fact that the majority of Nigerians involved in video film production do not have and do not require extensive formal training is undoubtedly an asset where many youth are not guaranteed the option of pursuing higher education of any kind, and especially higher technical education.

By and large, then, the human and financial capabilities for production and reproduction of video films are within reach for interested parties even in a country facing continuing economic crises and where only a small, though growing, proportion of the population have access to higher technical education. At the same time, the level of investment needed to sustain this accessible technology and to pay the workers involved with any one film project is high enough to motivate the directors and producers to seek as wide a distribution as possible. In other words, the impetus for national and ultimately transnational distribution of the end product stems at least partly from the costs of production. Where the technology of production and reproduction of a creative practice is accessible both in technical and financial terms to many individuals in minoritized populations, but costly enough to require a certain level of profitability, distribution of the finished product is likely to extend beyond national borders, giving rise to what could be described as an instance of minor transnationalism.

## Parallel Economies

Asked about her desires for the Nigerian video film in a 2005 interview, Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, one of the industry's most highly paid female actors, said she hoped it would grow to become "a parallel market," comparable to but independent of Hollywood (Jalade Ekeinde). All indications are that the industry is headed in this very direction. The critical shifts in the development of Nigerian video film, the orientation of the narratives, the actual production and distribution of the narratives already owe a lot to the culture of the West African market place, to a historic practice of buying, selling, and investing, both locally and regionally. Though West African market activities are often referred to as an informal economy, it might be more accurate to describe them as constituting a parallel economy that is transnational in range and occasionally intersects with the official economy regulated by the state. In his contribution to the volume on globalization and culture edited by Jameson and Miyoshi in 1998, Manthia Diawara rightly identifies West African markets as "centers of international consumption and cross-cultural fertilization" noting in addition that "merchandise from a variety of origins are on display in the traditional markets" (114).

Diawara does not, however, focus on the role of the West African market culture in facilitating local production and regional distribution of locally produced goods. But this is exactly what has happened with Nigerian video film. Indeed it is difficult to account for the origins and explain the subsequent evolution of Nigerian video film without referring to this parallel economy. For example, much of the funding for the films has come and continues to come from individuals who have made their money in the so-called informal economy. Only they were willing to take the risk of investing in a local product without demanding the kind of collateral that banks or the state might have required. Local businessmen involved in the retail trade in videocassettes were the ones who took the initiative in funding film production in the early years (Haynes and Okome 55). It also seems likely that the initial impulse to sell the films beyond Nigeria's borders may have emanated, not so much from the directors of the films, as from traders in local and regional markets who recognized the market value of this new product. The decision to begin producing films in English in the 1990s after successful experiences with films in Yoruba and Igbo was essentially a market driven choice (Haynes and Okome 64; Barrot 40). Another decision in 2002 to halt production for a couple of months so as to make production more cost effective and to ensure the highest possible returns on investment was also market driven (Barlet 134).

More recently, West Africa's informal economy has expanded its ties to alternative circuits of transnational trade. In the case of Nigeria, Larkin observes that it has "become progressively disembedded from the official global economy . . . and more integrated into a parallel, unofficial world economy that orients Nigeria toward new metropolises such as Dubai,

Singapore, and Beirut . . . ” (293). As he further explains, pirated American and Asian films reach Nigeria through this alternative transnational economy. But Nigerian video films also travel abroad, across Africa, into Europe and America through other unofficial circuits of transnational trade. Whether the destinations for the sale of Nigerian video films are old or new metropolises, what is important is that there are alternative global trade networks that feature particular African cities as important business sites, and escape regulation by the institutions overseeing the global trade associated with economically dominant countries. Diawara again sees traditional West African markets as the basis for the origin of these alternative global trade networks. He writes,

Markets in West Africa clearly undermine official forms of globalization according to which a nation-state attracts the investments of multinational corporations after undergoing a measure of structural adjustment, that is, devaluation. By producing disorder through pricing, pirating, smuggling, and counterfeiting, they participate in the resistance to multinational control of the national economy and culture. (121)

Precisely because they are not regulated to the same extent, if at all, these alternative trade networks offer profit opportunities to small time traders who do not have to accumulate the considerable resources needed to satisfy state regulations in order to move goods across state borders officially. Those Nigerians and other West Africans who choose to do so can easily travel abroad with one or two copies of several successful Nigerian video films, which they then reproduce at their destination, secure in the knowledge that the authorities in most Western countries are unlikely to devote energy to prosecuting individuals who pirate films made in an African country. The producers and directors of Nigerian video film do not benefit directly from this global traffic in their films, and are exasperated by it, but it does ensure transnational circulation of the films and has brought name recognition to the stars of the Nigerian video film industry in many African countries as well as in African immigrant communities in Europe and America. As such, and wherever Africans reside in large numbers today, Nigerian video film stars like Ramsey Nouah, Zach Orji, and Genevieve Nnaji, among others, will likely draw a crowd. For example, a riot reportedly broke out when the popular Nigerian film comedians Aki and Pawpaw failed to turn up for a scheduled event in Sierra Leone in 2003 (Ogunbayo 48). On her visit to Sierra Leone, Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, the Nigerian star who says she has acted in more than 250 movies, was not only welcomed by crowds at the airport, but was also introduced to the Head of State. Even on private visits to the United States and in public spaces like shopping malls, Jalade Ekeinde has been recognized and approached by African immigrants from a variety of countries (Jalade Ekeinde).

### The Regional Popular

Clearly, the bulk of the audience for Nigerian video film is located in Africa, or comprises overwhelmingly Africans resident in and outside



Africa. The films circulate widely within Africa, but also through the informal conduits that deliver products from “home” to Africans living abroad. From a structural and economic point of view, the reasons for this geographic and ethnic clustering of the audience are self-evident. To generate any kind of mainstream Western audience, the sellers of the films would have to make use of the official channels of distribution outside Africa; in other words, they would have to access and satisfy the conditions for participation in the official global economy. Furthermore, and in the unlikely event that the small time traders of Nigerian video film were able to do this, and ensure at least minimal circulation of the films in outlets patronized by mainstream Western audiences, they would still be at a disadvantage in trying to sell a product whose technical quality and narrative style are so dissimilar to that associated with offerings available in the dominant media. The facilities available in the Western world—which are less widespread in Africa—would also make conspicuous the disparity between the technical quality of Nigerian video films and especially American movies, making it less likely that Western audiences would want to watch Nigerian video films in significant numbers. Finally, and most importantly, the Nigerian video film narratives themselves might hold very little appeal for most Western audiences.

While Nigerian video film continues to be an unknown quantity for mainstream and even more adventurous Western audiences, in Nigeria itself, in many parts of West Africa, and increasingly outside the West African sub-region, Nigerian video films have clearly become a dominant force. The production, circulation and viewing of these films corresponds to a distinct form of cultural literacy that I would like to describe here as the regional popular. If the minor as defined by Deleuze and Guattari is cultural production constructed “within a major language” (16), regional popular forms as one version of the minor draw upon the minor genres and minor technologies of dominant global culture, notably, in this case, melodrama, film, and video technology among others. Producers of regional popular culture are brash in their claims about their work, and seemingly unaware of their own marginality relative to dominant global culture. For the most part, these producers neither position their work in relation to dominant culture, nor exhibit an oppositional stance towards it. At the same time, regional popular works recycle thematic and aesthetic elements from both dominant and minoritized cultures without apology and without acknowledgement. There is little concern here for the kind of “hypercompetent reproduction” (29) described by Appadurai with respect to Filipino imitations of American music. While the regional popular is equally indebted to indigenous practices and beliefs, most regional popular works exhibit a complex attitude towards indigenous culture, often involving a mixture of praise, irony, ambivalence, and tentative acceptance.

For commercial reasons, distribution of regional popular works is regional in reach rather than simply national, and within the region in question, Nigerian video film often occupies a commanding position as a

popular form of entertainment. Given its growing appeal among African film audiences, Nigerian video film tends to function more and more as a regional equivalent of what Hamid Naficy has called “unaccented cinema” (4), that is a cinema practice which, by virtue of its dominance with a given public, establishes a stylistic norm, and dictates trends for other forms of filmmaking directed at the same public. Currently, African films that do not borrow from the aesthetics and narrative format of Nigerian video film are likely to be perceived as “accented” or unusual by African audiences, and filmmakers from other African countries seeking commercial success with a national or regional audience are under pressure to tell the kinds of stories associated with Nigerian video film. Thus, for example, many Ghanaian film directors, including Vera Mensah, Kofi Yirenkyi, and Dugbartey Nanor, among others, have expressed concerns about the growing influence of Nigerian video films on Ghanaian filmmaking.

With Africa’s largest and one of its most diverse populations, the size and composition of Nigerian audiences for local films undoubtedly strengthens the hands of Nigerian filmmakers when it comes to dictating tastes and trends for popular filmmaking elsewhere in Africa. In absolute numbers, there are certainly more filmmakers in Nigeria than in other African countries. And all things being equal, more copies of individual Nigerian films will be produced and end up in circulation within and outside Nigeria than copies of films made in other African countries for commercial distribution. A bigger rather than a smaller national set of consumers or audience thus seems to be a prerequisite for the emergence of a minor transnational cultural practice in the commercial mode.

Why Nigerian video films are so appealing to regional audiences is itself a question that requires more sustained investigation than is possible in this paper, but suffice it to say that the themes of Nigerian video film are for its regional audiences more topical and locally relevant than the themes of Hollywood or even Indian cinema. Whatever Nigerian video films may lack in technical quality, acting, and narrative style, they make up for in a high degree of localized immediacy. Hollywood may dazzle by its special effects, but it is Nigerian video film that dramatizes the challenges which appear most pressing to many urban African audiences, whether these relate to the pressures emanating from the extended family, the relevance of new and older forms of spirituality, or the struggle to escape poverty. The appeal of Nigerian video film for national and regional audiences can also be traced in part to the determination of the financial backers and directors of Nigerian video film to remain responsive to the demands of local audiences. The fact that a successful film narrative quickly spawns imitations and spin offs is another indication of this responsiveness to local audiences on the part of directors and producers.

For the directors, it may be a matter of professional satisfaction and competency to produce a successful film. For the producers who advance the funds for making the film, it is almost certainly a question of securing

adequate returns on their investment. To this end, some producers have been known to insist on the use of particular actors, guaranteed to sell the film, or on the inclusion of particular storylines and scenes likely to draw in an audience. Because the film directors and producers do not have the means to track sales of their films outside Nigeria, or even the means to prevent piracy of their films within Nigeria, they create their film narratives with the aim of making an immediate impression on a local and national audience upon release of the film. In other words, and despite the fact that many Nigerian video films achieve circulation on a transnational scale, film directors and producers impelled both by professional and commercial considerations, work with national audiences in mind and create narratives crafted to respond first and foremost to the perceived interests and shifts in orientation of national publics.

Unlike Cowen (81) then, I do not see any contradiction between serving the needs of the domestic audience and pursuing commercial goals. On the contrary, cultural production that is commercial and targets national publics creates a strong foundation for subsequent transnational circulation of goods produced locally and offers the best chance for competing with or even displacing cultural products circulating through the official global economy within the national and regional contexts. Where a local, national, or regional trade in cultural goods is able to exist apart from the official global economy, local cultural productivity may be able to thrive in spite of the sheer volume of material from the global economy inundating all locations. Judging from the Nigerian experience, the existence of specifically regional markets for the circulation of cultural goods may offer more help than subsidies in making local cultural production viable and enabling such local production to withstand the pressures emanating from the global economy. In the specific case of Nigerian video film, not only does this commercial mode of filmmaking work with local audiences and publics in mind, it is literally dependent upon these audiences and on accurate perceptions of trends within local publics for continued survival. As such, a film director whose film ends up a commercial failure may find it difficult to persuade the same or other producers to fund his or her future film projects, and might be seen as having misjudged the ever-changing orientations of local audiences. Given the commercial context of production and circulation, responsiveness to local and national audiences is more than just an option for Nigerian video filmmakers: it is an imperative.

The fact that production and circulation of Nigerian video films occur within a configuration that is commercial but also largely distinct from the global as well as the formal economy of the Nigerian and other African states definitely ensures that the filmmakers pay attention to local audiences. But it also creates opportunity for Nigerians and interested Africans from other countries to take the lead in setting the agenda for film narratives and organizing the sale of the films. No one who has been to Idumota market in Lagos, Nigeria, or Opera Square in Accra, Ghana, among many locations where West African video films are being sold and

reproduced, can doubt that the West Africans involved in the video film industry operate as knowledgeable and autonomous agents pursuing their own business objectives within this parallel economy. The Nigerian video film industry is not traditional by any stretch of the imagination, but it is clearly centered in a local and regional marketplace, where African businessmen and women responsive to local publics make the critical decisions and determine the narrative priorities to be pursued.

### Global Ethnic

As is well known, a limited and very small number of African films do circulate within the official global economy, making their appearance at independent film festivals, in theaters for art house cinema, and in Western university classrooms among others. These include the films made by many of the best-known African film directors. I have chosen to describe the form of cultural literacy associated with the production and circulation of these films as the global ethnic. The qualifier “global” appears particularly appropriate because circulation of the films occurs mainly on a global rather than on a regional/national basis. The audience for this kind of film is more composite in terms of nationality, race, and ethnicity; it is also more geographically dispersed than the audience for regional popular films. Specialized publics spread around the world, and especially outside Africa, have access to these films through the kinds of institutions that Naficy (60) describes as the microdistributors of alternative films. Opportunities for viewing these films in Africa are few and far between. Owners of commercial theaters in Africa, where they do exist, are reluctant to show such films, doubting their commercial value. The small time traders who peddle Nigerian video films in markets all over Africa are generally unaware of these films, though it is likely that if they did become aware of them, they would not consider them a worthwhile investment since they seek very quick returns on their investments.

I also use the term ethnic to describe these films as the great majority of viewers who are non-African and non-specialists in African cinema tend to see the film narratives as uniquely representative of Africa at the level of the aesthetics, themes, lifestyles portrayed, and/or opinions expressed. Speaking in particular about what he describes as ethnic cinema and one of the forms of “accented” filmmaking, Naficy (70) has pointed out how fictional films made in this mode are often read as documentaries by viewers from outside the cultural context shown in the films. Although I am not using the term ethnic in the same way as does Naficy in his discussions on accented filmmaking, I believe his observations would also apply to African global ethnic films as I have defined them here, especially since the films are probably more familiar to non-Africans than to Africans, and are seen more frequently outside Africa than in Africa.

Global ethnic cultural productions more clearly embody the qualities that Deleuze and Guattari identify with minor literature, and which JanMohamed and Lloyd associate with minority discourse. Whether or not global ethnic texts are written in a major language, they exemplify responses to the major genres of dominant culture. They also circulate transnationally along channels accredited in the global economy, unlike regional popular forms which circulate through unaccredited trade networks even when they use a major language. While authors of global ethnic texts may affect an oppositional stance towards literal and literary figures of authority in both dominant and minority cultures, their criticism is more frequently expressed in terms that are legible within dominant culture. In short, global ethnic works express opposition by invoking categories familiar within dominant culture. Finally, and significantly, global ethnic works privilege what Kubayanda calls “the collective voice of enunciation” (249). Global ethnic authors represent themselves and are represented to their publics in multiple locations as spokespersons on behalf of such collectives as women, the poor, or even the nation.

Funding constitutes a particular challenge in the making of African global ethnic films since most of the African filmmakers whose films end up on the global circuit are engaged in expensive celluloid filmmaking. Thus far, funding has come from foreign governments, foreign media groups, and international non-governmental organizations. In a recent interview, Ousmane Sembene, perhaps the most famous of the filmmakers on the global circuit, dismissed concerns about the impact of foreign funding on the making of African films, declaring, “in terms of financial investment, I really don’t care. Frankly, I would sleep with the devil and her mother and her father to finance my films! If Hollywood gives me some money, I’ll accept it. It’s the content of the films that matters to me” (Fellows 57). Sembene may have been exaggerating for emphasis here, and he did go on to explain that he could refuse conditions proposed by potential funders for his films if they were not to his liking. The fact is, however, and whether or not Sembene acknowledges it, both African and non-African financial backers have their objectives and are not likely to provide support for film projects that do not fit in with their own larger concerns. Furthermore, and while individual filmmakers will have their own priorities and style, the combination of funding from outside Africa, and limited opportunities for distribution within Africa, does mean that responsiveness to local constituencies in Africa, and of Africans, plays a much less important role in the production of most global ethnic films. This can be problematic if African global ethnic films are read as offering the definitive perspective of cultural insiders on any given question even while the opinions of other African constituencies are rendered invisible.

Although Nigerian video film as an example of the regional popular suffers from some of the worst excesses of commercial filmmaking, and although African global ethnic films often offer a more politically critical engagement with the challenges confronting contemporary Africa, it is the regional popular mode of cultural production, more so than the global

ethnic, that currently thrives on dynamic interaction with predominantly African publics. Unfortunately, however, there is a tendency to seek the lone, authoritative, and collective voice frequently associated with global ethnic works instead of acknowledging not only that individuals in disadvantaged societies have diverse opinions about their own lives but also that such individuals may coalesce into multiple, overlapping constituencies and publics with conflicting positions. Because they are considered uniquely normative, global ethnic cultural products and the subjects who personify these products often seem to complicate this process of accounting for the diversity of constituencies in non-Western localities. Trends in such localities are often subject to misinterpretation at a time when there seems to be considerable openness in Western societies towards cultural insiders from non-Western locations, as long as they express the views agreeable to either the liberal or conservative interests providing financial support, and who wish to use the depiction offered by these non-Western cultural insiders to advance a particular political agenda on the national or international stage.

Furthermore, the consequences of global ethnic production, as one type of minor transnational practice, are quite different from those observed for regional popular production. In the end, and despite the best intentions, global ethnic films, as a non-commercial form of production dependent on the resources of the global economy, do not present a significant challenge to the dominance of global media in the West, and especially in the regions of the world supposedly represented in and by such films. By comparison, regional popular productions do compete effectively with global media within economically and politically disadvantaged communities. More importantly, they enable a wider range of voices focused on the subjectivity of communities living on the margins of the global economy to emerge from within those communities and for such voices to take center stage locally and regionally.

What distinguishes the regional popular in these areas of the world is its resolutely commercial orientation, its basis in a regional trade network that is partly or significantly disconnected from the official global economy, and its high degree of responsiveness to geographically circumscribed markets, publics, and constituencies. These three factors do more to facilitate the development of alternative styles of expression and address in cultural production around the world, and they do more to give agency to locals who are resident in, remain responsive to, and engage with different constituencies in particular localities around the world, than does the support extended by international funders to global ethnic production. There is undoubtedly a need and a place for non-commercial narrative production in Africa, both in print and in film, so that as many political orientations and sensibilities as possible can be represented in the African public sphere and so that dissent can be adequately expressed. It is, however, commercial narrative production, based in minor transnational trade networks, that currently allows Africans to engage in a form of cultural activity whose production and dissemination they control

and which, locally and regionally, offers effective competition with global media.

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