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Censorship and the Content of Nigerian Home Video Films[1]

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I. Introduction

This paper examines film censorship in Nigeria and problematizes how this regulatory practice affects [or does not] the content of video films, Africa's most popular expressive art form. As a point of entry, I begin with a cultural history/survey of film censorship in Nigeria before going on to offer an assessment of the institutional bodies responsible for the control of culture within the Nigerian state. I will also examine the statutory provisions backing and guiding such regulatory activities on the part of the state. Further more, the paper will critically examine the actual process of video censorship in Nigeria and attempt to rethink some of the implications of these processes for the specific context of "the field of culture production" (Bourdieu 1993) in the country. As an inroad into the complex cultural field of this emergent visual art form in Africa, the paper will not only scrutinize statutory regulatory provisions, but also other social forces within the Nigerian video colony, which determine what we see [or do not see] in the films. Following from some of the internal factors within the video industry itself (which I will privilege because they have a strong influence over content), I argue that though there exists a statutory film and video censorship board, much of the contents of the video films are dictated by larger market forces rather than by the government. It is this internal cultural dynamic within the industry itself that I refer to here as "hidden censorship" (to borrow Ekwuazi's term)[2]. To be clear, the effort here is not to downplay or underrate the Nigerian Censors Board, but rather to call attention to the specific cultural economies around the video enterprise.

Film censorship—or censorship in general—is hardly new, yet its practice differs from one national or even regional zone of culture

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[1] This paper was originally presented at the pioneer African Video Film Workshop organized by the Institute of African Studies, University of Bayreuth, Germany [in] 2001. It has however undergone significant revision since that first presentation. I am particularly grateful to all the anonymous reviewers whose insightful comments have helped improve on the original draft. I sincerely wish I were able to incorporate all of the great suggestions received.

[2] See Ekwauzi's Film in Nigeria, 1991.

production to another. These differences, and their consequences for the cultural output of different art forms in different socio-political circumstances, continue to call for the attention of the scholar of culture. The bourgeoning video film culture in Nigeria, for example, and its specific circumstances of production deserve a critical appraisal, if nothing else, as a budding visual form in sub-Saharan Africa with all its challenging socio-economic and political contexts. Moreover, given that it is *the people's art*, thriving outside the superintending gaze of the state, it is imperative to assess its relationship with the state. Understanding the nature of such a relationship and the implications of such connections for the contents of this flourishing continental visual art form will be key to any cultural critique of the video films. The flurry of critical scholarship on the video culture so far, from within and outside the continent, has paid little attention to issues of censorship concentrating rather on its genealogy, economics, themes, and unconventionally rebellious style as opposed to conventional pioneer African cinema. It is this scholastic gap that this essay attempts to fill. While the paper does not lay claims to any exhaustive treatment of the subject of censorship within Nigeria's film and video industry, it provides preliminary inroads into that unexplored field. The aim then is to reflect new interests and generate debates rather than make conclusive judgments on the subject of video censorship in Nigeria.

II. Film Censorship in Nigeria—A Survey

By 1912, film was just nine years old in Nigeria. In their insightful historical account of the emergence of Nigerian cinema, Alfred Opubor and Onoura Nwuneli (1979) recount that the medium first made inroads into the country's cultural space through private merchants in the year 1903. Yet less than a decade after its foray into Nigeria's entertainment ambience, the British colonial government had consciously begun to erect a stifling regulatory environment for the nation's film industry. It was in 1912 that the then colonial government of Nigeria promulgated "The Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance." One of the provisions of this ordinance demanded that plays, including films, could only be exhibited/screened in venues licensed by the colonial government. Exhibitors or performers who transgressed this provision were liable to a fine of twenty pounds for each day the exhibition or performance was held. The other part of that ordinance, which is relevant to our present discussion, is that relating to the licensing of the performance. The ordinance stipulated that for any performance(s) or exhibition(s) to be licensed, a complete and detailed description of the play, film, or any other cultural product, had to be submitted. The contravention of this provision was to attract a fine of fifty pounds. From this mandate, it is obvious that any play or film at the time read as imbued with anti-colonial ideology was not likely to see the light of day. Thus, all the performances—plays, concerts, musicals, open-air dances, and films—exhibited during this period had to, in one way or another, promote British colonial ideology or

interests. Suffice it to say that one cannot speak of film censorship in the real sense of the word during this period as there was in fact no indigenous film industry;[3] there were no filmmakers producing films for their own people. The point here however is that the 1912 ordinance inaugurated the initial impetus for censorship of arts in the country generally, and for a long time, it had a lingering cultural grip on the environment of arts in the country as subsequent statutes were either drawn directly, or adapted from it.

While observing that there existed no indigenous film industry in Nigeria, the argument must be made that the 1912 ordinance was technically responsible for that absence of an initial cinema culture. In more ways than one it asphyxiated early the initial potential for indigenous film production. Onookome Okome highlights this point when he argues that as the first legislation on culture in Nigeria, the ordinance "was . . . a reaction by the British aimed at forestalling indigenous cultural initiative" (Okome & Haynes 1997:29). Indigenous cinema production did not, or perhaps, could not have existed because local cinophiles were fairly certain they would never be granted screening rights even if they made forays into the intriguing enterprise of cinema production and exhibition. For a long time then, what the Nigerian film audience saw were films that favored and inflated British imperialist interests—culturally and politically. This of course is unlike the case in French Africa where, though there existed some form of censorship, indigenous initiatives in the arts were encouraged through financial support. To be clear, this is not to imply that there never existed forms of censorship in French Africa. Manthia Diawara's expansive history of African cinema privileges insights into the structural strangulation of indigenous cinema enterprises in French Africa through censorship. Drawing heavily from the pioneering work of the pre-eminent historian of African Cinema, Paulin S. Viera, Diawara observes that with the emergence of movie soundtracks in 1928, the French government, which hitherto had no official policy on cinema in their colonies was prompted "to take measures to control film activities in the colonies, lest the involvement of Africans in these activities become subversive or anticolonialist" (Diawara 22). Thus, in 1934 the notorious "*Le de'cret Laval*" was enacted. Its objective was "to control the content of films that were shot in Africa and to minimize the creative roles played by Africans in the making of films" (Diawara 22).

In spite of this observation however, Diawara does not refute the role the French government and certain individuals (especially Jean Rouch and Jean-Rene Debrix) played in "furthering film production in their former colonies in a manner that had not interested other ex-colonial powers such as England [under which colonial Nigeria directly fell] or Belgium" (21). While keeping an eye on its content, the French at least encouraged indigenous production through different sources of funding. Indeed, to

[3] Only the then Colonial Film Unit (CFU) had an exclusive mandate to produce, distribute, and exhibit films (mostly documentaries) within the empire.

date, the French still fund film projects by local African filmmakers in their former colonies. Ayoka Chenzira[4] confirmed this benefaction of the French to cinema production in Francophone Africa when she declared that "[t]hey put money into it" (Okoli 52),[5] arguing, in the final analyses, that this accounts for why indigenous cinema production thrives more in Francophone countries than in their Anglophone counterparts. Comparatively therefore, owing to this patronage, the former French colonies in Africa to date retain a somewhat more vibrant film industry than do their Anglophone counterparts.[6] Thus, the cultural implications of the 1912 public performance edict, combined with a complete absence of any British institutional or individual support for indigenous cinema production in Nigeria, is all too conspicuous to be rehearsed here.

In 1933, pioneer efforts at inaugurating a formal film censorship body began in the colony with the statutory appointment of a film censors' board. This was the first concerted effort at censoring film as an art in the country. The terms of reference of this board covered both imported and locally produced films. Though the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) dominated film production with its *Oeuvre* of propaganda documentaries and newsreels, the churches too were involved in the production of religious films, which can best be compared to the morality and/or cycle plays of medieval Europe. Also involved in the film business at the time were importers (mostly Lebanese) of cheap English and American feature films and soap operas. The responsibility of the newly commissioned Censors Board was to monitor these cultural actors in the industry. The underlining principle guiding the board was that British imperialist interests were never to be undermined through the power of the visual image. For more than two and a half decades, this committee strutted across the Nigerian film industry, expunging the slightest implicit suggestions of anti-British rhetoric.

The late 1950s and the 1960s saw the dawn of independence for many of the colonies in the continent. Independence for Nigeria in 1960 not only implied a review of political and economic policies, it also called for a fresh overhauling of the cultural and creative sector. The understanding here was that the democratization of the cultural ambience was also part of the great dividends of independence. This new cultural orientation gave birth to the "Cinematographic Act" of 1963. This was the guiding reference for film censorship in Nigeria for many years. Hyginus Ekwuazi (1991) provides a comprehensive account of the Cinematographic Act of 1963. According to him, the act empowered the minister to establish for the country a federal board of film censors made up of "fit persons and organization representing the thought and opinion of

[4] Professor, and one-time Chair of the Department of Media and Communication Arts, City College, New York, USA.

[5] She made this statement while in Nigeria for a week-long workshop at the French Cultural Center in 2001. See Okoli Tunde.

[6] Frank Ukadike, renowned professor of African cinema also re-echoed this point in Lagos during a lecture at the French Cultural Center in 2001 (See Babatunde 2001).

persons resident in Nigeria" (155). It was the minister's prerogative to consider and choose who was fit or unfit to be on the board—no criteria were set down. This enormous latitude granted the minister was to become one of the most unsettling barbs in the flesh of the culture industry as many a minister appointed members merely for political gratifications rather than with the peculiar needs of the office in mind.

The board was to be headed by a president, usually the chief federal adviser of Education. The other participants were to include six official government members, six members representing voluntary agencies, four members from the Lagos City Council, representatives of the three regions (usually five in number), and some representatives of what was designated as "other interests." By 1971, the police, the federal ministry of labor, the social welfare of Lagos state, the Roman Catholic diocese of Lagos, the Methodist church of Nigeria and other interest groups were incorporated into the board. Though reconstituted in 1977, the representation remained largely the same as that of 1971. The newly incorporated bodies included the young men/women Christian association and the supreme council for Islamic affairs. The sixteen-member board was usually divided into four, with each group known as the censors committee. These four committees covered four different geo-political zones in the country. The board's duties covered both local and international films. The films exempted from their terms of reference were only those produced or exhibited by the representatives of any commonwealth or foreign country, the federal or state governments, the United Nations Organization or other educational, scientific or cultural bodies including television or broadcasting stations.

The criteria for approval of films by the board were that any film, whether local or foreign, should not:

> (a) "Undermine national security;
> (b) Induce or reinforce corruption of private and public morality
> (c) Encourage illegal or criminal acts
> (d) Expose people of African descent to ridicule and contempt; and
> (e) Encourage racial religious or ethnic discrimination and conflict" (Ekwuazi 158).

These provisions were later supplemented by the 1987 "Communication Policy" which touched on areas relating to the educational and entertainment value of films, its capacity for promoting national unity, and its potential for enhancing national culture. Using the above criteria, the board could approve or disapprove of any film.

For a greater part of the 1980s, the board remained largely non-existent with a mere ad-hoc committee in its place.[7] During this interregnum, both filmmakers and government tried hard to initiate proposals to resuscitate the board, but without success. The Bayo Oduneye

[7] This is itself not unconnected with political intrigues amongst military politicians who extended their political influences to almost every aspect of national life including the cultural.

led review panel is significant in this regard. Yet all of these efforts yielded no fruit as they were beset, as usual, by political rather than professional considerations. It was not until September 1993 that decree no. 85 of the same year empowered the establishment of the Nigeria film and video Censors Board.

III. The NFVCB and Video Censorship in Nigeria

A mélange of factors—political, economic, and social—coalesced to impel the recourse to video production in Nigeria. Emerging scholarship on the video phenomenon in Africa (Okome 1999; Okome and Haynes 2000; Ukadike 2000 & 2003; Ogunleye 2004; Adesayan 2000; Lawuyi 1997) points toward a plummeting economy worsened by political instability and general social collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s as factors responsible for the emergence of home video production. Largely unemployed, and permanently weighed down by numerous socio-economic privations, the working class had to invent novel means of survival, including in the realm of cultural entertainment. The unemployed but creative Nigerian youth, aptly described by Afolabi Adesanya as "the hair-brained boys" (41), were at the forefront of the new video culture. The video format, which was cheap and less cumbersome to produce, appealed to the swelling numbers of marginalized but innovative urban youth, and a beehive of culturally innovative activities began to make their presence felt in this small entertainment industry. Informal, private-sector based, and laissez-faire in nature, the new video culture became an enterprise open to all-comers. In no time, a deluge of films with innumerably diverse themes and cultural contents followed. Before long, partly due to the inchoate nature of the new industry, there emerged a huge public out-cry for some form of official regulation. But the Federal Board for film Censorship, which operated under the aegis of the Cinematographic Act of 1963-64, was moribund. In any case, the act did not cover the video genre.

So in 1993 the Nigeria Film and Video Censors' Board was born. The instrument for its establishment is decree no. 85, which was published in the official gazette no. 25 (Vol. 80) on September 1st, 1993. It was not until 1994, however, that the decree was properly energized with the actual inauguration of the board. The functions of this 48-member board as provided by the decree include:

Functions:

a. To license.
    i. A person to exhibit films and video works.
    ii. A premises to the purpose of exhibiting films and videos works.
b. To censor films and video works.
c. To regulate and prescribe safety precaution to be observed in licensed premises.
d. To regulate and control cinematographic exhibition.
e. To keep a register of all films and video works,
    i. Submitted for approval for exhibiting throughout Nigeria
    ii. Approved unconditionally

iii. Refused approval subject to such conditions as the board may impose.

f. To keep a register for all:
   i. Licensed films and video exhibition premises.
   ii. Film and video distribution companies.
   iii. Video shops, centers, clubs or associations.

g. To keep a register of all the film and video exhibitors

h. Keep a record for all necessary information on film and video Producers whose work(s) is to be distributed or exhibited in Nigeria.

   i. Keep records of all changes in any register kept by the board.

The board has a 22-point criteria and a 16-point technical sheet for assessment (see figure 1.1 and 1.2 in each case. Figure 1.3 is the film censors log sheet).

FIG. 1.1: NATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO CENSORS BOARD
CRITERIA FOR FILM AND VIDEO CENSORSHIP

S/NO	CRITERION	REMARKS	
I	Does it have educational value?		
II	Does it have entertainment value?		
III	Does it promote Nigerian culture?		
IV	Does it promote Nigerian unity?		
V	Does it promote Nigerian interests?		
VI	Does it have potentials for undermining national security?		
VII	Does it have potentials to include or reinforce corruption of private or public morality?		
VIII	Does it have potentials to encourage violence?		
IX	Does it glorify violence i.e. violence for violence sake? Is it replete with sexual violence?		
X	Does it expose African people to ridicule or contempt?		
XI	Does it have potentials for encouraging illegal or criminal act i.e. crime without punishment/retribution?		
XII	Does it have potentials for encouraging racial conflict or discrimination?		
XIII	Does it have potentials for encouraging ethnic conflict or discrimination?		
XIV	Does it have potentials for encouraging religious conflict/ discrimination?		
XV	Is it blasphemous? Does it indulge in profanity/vulgarity?		
XVI	Does it promote obscenity?		
XVII	Is it indecent?		
XVIII	Is it sadistic?		
XIX	Could it be injurious to morality (public and for minors)?		
XX	Is it likely to encourage or incite public disorder?		
XXI	Is it likely to encourage or incite crime?		
XXII	Is it un-desirable in the public interest (in its entirety)?		
XXIII	General comments/approval		
XXIV	Categorization		
XXV	Signature/Name		
XXVI	Date		
XXVII	Title		

FIG. 1.2 NATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO CENSORS BOARD
TECHNICAL DETAILS

TITLE	DATE	LANG:
ITEM	**Observation**	**Score**
1 Lighting		
2 Sound/Audio		
3 Production/Duration/Artistic design		
4 Story Line and development/dialogue		
5 Editing		
6 Videography/photography		
7 Music		
8 Graphics/Opticals/Effects		
9 Acting/Continuity		
10 Direction		
11 Make-Up/ Costumes		
12 Sets		
13 Acting/Characterization		
14 Poster		
15 Trailer		
16 Cassette Package Design		
17 Classification		
Name		
Signature		
Date		

FIG. 1.3: NATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO CENSORS BOARD
FILM CENSORS LOG SHEET

TIME	*SHOT/SEQUENCE/* SCENE	COMMENTS	OBSERVATIONS
1-5mn			Story Situated
6-10 mn			Story Not Situated
11-15 mn			Theme Music
16-20 mn			Foreign Music
21-25 mn			Stock Names
26-30 mn			Commenced
31-35 mn			Ended
36-40 mn			Education Value: Yes/No
41-45 mn			
46-50 mn			Missing Establishment Shots
51-55 mn			
56-50 mn			
61-65 mn			Presenter's Name
66-70 mn			Profession
71-75 mn			Organization
76-80 mn			Membership No
81-85 mn			Director
86-90 mn			Producer
91-95 mn			Writer
96-100 mn			Editor
101-105 mn			Gauge
106-110 mn			Language
111-115 mn			Love Sc
116-120 mn			Sex Sc
121-125 mn			Violent Sc
126-130 mn			Advertisements
131-135 mn			
136-140 mn			
141-145 mn			
146-150 mn			Synchronization problem
Name			Duration
Signature			
Date			Genre

It is the board's belief that assessment of content is not enough. The technical quality of a film or video must also be considered. According to Mr. Ademola James,[8] "[the] management of the board also believes that the 16-point technical details could not be ignored otherwise the board's competence and integrity could be compromised especially when a badly produced movie, full of numerous technical lapses, errors, deficiencies and obvious mistakes, is approved for public release" (22).

The preview panel is usually made up of different professionals such as lawyers, sociologist, historians, linguists, the clergy, etc. These examiners are trained professionally in film censorship, usually by the Nigeria Film Institute, as a joint partnership programme with the NFVCB. In special cases, the board contracts language consultants in Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Efik and so forth, to assist with previewing and approving films.

The process of video film censorship itself is simple. On appointment with the board, any member of the crew of the said film, not the marketer or exhibitor, brings the film for preview. The amount for censorship runs between N15000 and N20, 000.[9] The preview is done against the criteria indicated in figure 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 above.

Classification symbols used by the film and video board include:

a. "G" for general Audience—Brown colour code
b. "C" intended for children—Green colour code
c. "NC" not recommended for children—Purple colour code
d. "18" for mature Audience – "yellow ochre" colour code
e. "RE" restricted exhibition - "Blue" colour code (NFVCB 80).

As a matter of principle, the board does not involve itself with either the pre-production or postproduction activities of the filmmaker(s). According to Mr. Rotimi Martins,[10] "we do not always know the story. We don't go to location. When the job has been completed, you now bring it to us for censorship" ("Personal interview" 2001). This is obviously different from other film cultures such as the United States where the rating board starts its work from the scripted screenplay itself. The implication of this is that the NFVCB can rarely control the content of video films. What they do is merely tinker with what is presented to them in one way or the other in accordance with existing censorship standards.

Between 1994 and April 2005, the board censored about four thousand, six hundred films, only one of which was celluloid.[11] Out of this

[8] Ademola was the National executive director of the NFVCB at the time I conducted this research in June 2001. The Board is now headed by a new Director General, Mr. Emeka Mbah, appointed since 2005 by the civil democratic government.
[9] At the time this research was conducted in 2001, the official pricee for censorship preview was N5000.00.
[10] At the time of this research, Rotimi Martins was the southwest coordinator of the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) in Lagos.
[11] Five years later, this data will certainly be dated but what has not changed I think, is whether any celluloid production had been undertaken since then.

number, some twenty-five or so films have been completely embargoed. They include *I Hate My Village*, which portrays the population of a certain part of the south east of Nigeria as cannibals; *A Woman in Love*, a Ghanaian film that supposedly glamorizes lesbianism, and *Iyawo Alhaji*, whose ban was later repealed. The others are *Valentine Sex Party* and *Sex is a Nigerian*.[12] The films that were banned in 1999 contained indecent, obscene, and overtly sexual scenes, which the board considered harmful to public morality.

Detailed as the outline for licensing may seem, one may argue that the NFVCB remains largely ineffectual. Apart from providing data about the video industry and creating public awareness about its operations through publication of books, bulletins and handbills, the board remains largely handicapped in determining the content of video film in the country. The exception so far will be the tenure of Mrs. Roselyn Odeh. Her tenure as chairperson of the Censors Board between 2002 and 2005 was indeed remarkable in Nigeria's film history. During those years, there seemed to be something like a firm censorship environment in the country. Yet it was only for so long. She was accused of highhandedness by filmmakers and actually received critical knocks from the press for subjecting film censorship to what they considered to be narrow Catholic Christian dogmas. Tunde Kelani's Agogo'Ewo, for example, was rated 18 after a prolonged battle because it supposedly contained images that were considered to be in the realm of the fetish and thus morally improper for Nigeria's teeming video audience. Another of the significant producers in the Nigerian video industry, Helen Ukpabio, sought approval for her film *Rupture* but was denied. She was accused of infusing the film with inflammatory anti-catholic images. This "thematurge" (Okome 2004) and purveyor of the "war paradigm," especially between men and the forces of evil (Oha 192), unilaterally released the film. What followed was a prolonged legal battle. From the outset, the evangelist/filmmaker had "prophesied" that no serious consequences would befall her for releasing the film single-handedly without government approval. The film was of course released and nothing indeed has happened since then—a clear indication of the powerlessness of the censors board. A combination of factors accounts for this apparent institutional lethargy, or perhaps ineffectuality, but I will sketch only the outlines.

The geographical details of Nigeria are beyond the purview of this paper. Yet, for a country as large as Nigeria, with a population of approximately 150 million, thirty-six states, and a production rate of about one film per day, the board has only three operational zonal offices with the headquarters located in Abuja, the nation's capital. The three offices are located in Lagos (Southwest), Onitsha (South East), and Kano (North). As the South-West coordinator of the board in 2001 himself complained,

[12] A more recent instance in which the hammer of the Censors Board came down on a film, was the case of Rapture, produced by Helen Ukapabio of the Liberty Films. It was banned for its inflammatory references to apostasies amongst the Catholic clergy.

once a film is previewed by the board and classified, the marketers/exhibitors screen the original uncensored version in the hinterland and then sell or screen only the censored version within the vicinity where the board's office is domiciled. This is possible because the board has barely a handful of staff for field operations. Thus, the marketers and producers always have an upper hand.

Once again, on the screening committee of the NFVCB there should be representatives of the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC), which monitors the contents of broadcasting media (TV & radio), and the Advertisers Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON), which monitors advertisements. But these bodies have refused to feature in the preview sessions requiring the filmmakers to come to them for their own independent previews. If one is to hazard a guess, this may not be unconnected with the desire of these institutions, in the Nigerian bureaucratic fashion, to make their own money from the filmmakers. The result of this is that private TV stations screen violent, and in some cases, uncensored video films without checks or consequences. The already censored films, and in some cases even TV advertisements, feature violent promos for forthcoming video films. The situation in general is as though no censors board (nomination?) exists in spite of the claims of its re-invigoration by the democratic government of Obasanjo.

Furthermore, the police and customs services, which are supposed to be confederates to the NFVCB, are indifferent to their roles. Out of the ten cases of infringement reported by the board to the police, only two were prosecuted.[13] Importation and exportation of video films are done illegally across the Nigerian border under the watchful eyes of the nation's Customs and Immigration Service. Clearly the board can hardly be in charge of the industry alone without proper support from complementing statutory bodies.

Today the print media is awash with complaints of violence in video films. Tunde Okoli, a reporter with* Thisday Newspapers *wrote that "more than 95 percent of the video films churned out in the market from the production conclaves of Idumota and Surulere, Lagos, Iweka Road, Onitsha, and St. Michael Road, Aba, contain extremely violent scenes that exhibit nothing short of the bizarre" (38). On the heels of this, in the same paper on the 26 of March 2001, Oji Onoko wrote "just switch on your TV set and the promos hit you like a tornado. Gun shots, stick ups, rape, nothing is sacred" (26). The board, through its then southwest zonal coordinator, Mr. Rotimi Martins, made a feeble reply rationalizing its constraints. But it was all too obvious that the NFVCB is not in charge of what we see in our films. In a recent interview with one of the national dailies,[14] the new Director General of the NFVCB, Emeka

[13] Even the recent case of *Rapture* is still pending indefinitely in court and that might be the end as far as the warped Nigerian justice system is concerned.

[14] Olumide Iyanda. "I Want to Leave a Better Nollywood Behind Says Mbah." *The Daily Independent*, 26th July 2006.

Mbah, not only confessed to the continued indifference of the government to the culture sector (especially his board), but also hinted at a looming tension between the board and the assortment of artistes that litter the Nigerian video industry. This confession illuminates the very deep powerlessness that a statutory body like the NFVCB is experiencing. In the director's own words, the board's job is continuously "a challenging experience" (Iyanda 2006). Who then, if one may ask, is in charge when it comes to controlling the content of films in the Nigerian video industry?

III. Hidden Censorship and Content Implication for Nigerian Home Video Films.

Because filmmaking is a capital-intensive venture, all the production forces in the industry have always sought ways to exert control over what is finally produced. Often this is to enable producers to maximize their profit margin as much as possible. The film industry, therefore, has always had what Jay Black and Jennings Bryant describe as ". . . their strange history of self-regulation" (233). The corporate and artistic decisions in filmmaking are almost always inseparable. At this critical juncture of global neo-liberalism, though a film must fulfill certain aesthetic requirements, it must of necessity yield reasonable profit. This is the primary purpose that its makers want to fulfill.

The Nigerian home video colony is no different. Informal and private-sector -based, the major stakeholders in the industry have always sought ways of influencing the content of the films in order to maximize profit. They do this by inflecting popular mentalities in the video narratives. This intrinsic self-regulatory attitude, inherent within the film industry, is what Hyginus Ekwuazi (1991) appropriately refers to as "Hidden Censorship." The final part of this paper attempts to plot the role of the major stakeholders in the Nigerian home video industry. I aim to demonstrate how all of these cultural actors/factors affect the content of video films.

A. Marketers:[15] From the very outset of the video boom, the marketers were businessmen mostly involved in the importation and distribution of empty audio-visual cassettes and other electronic appliances and accessories.[16] Their primary aim has always been to ensure that their large consignments of imported audio-visual cassettes and other cheap electrical appliances are sold. With the emergence of home video films in the early 1990s, a novel business outlet opened up for the audio-visual cassette importers. These importers, ever ingenious and always

[15] I have used this term only as understood within the Nigerian video industry itself. As a counter-cultural production movement in the third world, both the practice of this popular culture form, and the nomenclatures it invents, do not fit into the prototypical or orthodox North American (Hollywood) paradigms.

[16] However, commercial players other than the initial electronic spare-parts dealers have now joined sponsorship of the videos.

seeking newer ways of making money, latched onto the video industry with renewed vigor. In the present dispensation they provide money for either a director or producer to shoot a film and then they mass-dub the finished product into empty cassettes and sell it to major distributors who in turn resell it to other small distributors. This way, they not only make money from the sale of their empty videocassettes but also from the sale of the finished films.

In his recent essay "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigeria Video Industry and the Infrastructure of Piracy" Brian Larkin (2004) provides deep insights into the very informal networks of the organization and commercialization of "cassette technology" especially in northern Nigeria. Suffice it to say here that it is generally estimated that an average Nigerian home movie sells about eighty (80) to one hundred and fifty (150) thousand copies. The more video film projects a marketer can fund, therefore, the more assured s/he is of disposing of his tapes. It is thus in the funding sphere that the marketers' influence is located. Because marketers fund the productions, they are always fastidious about what stories to put their money into. The scripts must usually correspond with their ideas of stories that will sell—very often connected in one way or another with what anthropologists—Jean and John Comaroff—have called "occult economies" (1999).

The marketers' background is important here. Mostly untrained in film production or any of its creative aspects, they are urban-based traders who by sheer hard work, and in some cases, dubious means, have leapt from the lower working class into the enviable status of petty urban bourgeoisie. Their gaze and social consciousness, however, never leaves that forsaken domain of poverty. They are always aware of the desperate attempts by their old-time contemporaries to catch up with them on the social ladder. These efforts come in different forms, some genuinely legitimate, and others supposedly diabolic and visceral even to the point of wasting human lives. It is these stories that the marketers have always sought to fund. Some of these stories, they claim, are about known contemporaries who have made the social leap from economic ground-zero through supposedly diabolical, fraudulent, and illicit means. In a sense, therefore, the marketers are storytellers themselves; versed in the complex and delicate world of postcolonial African city life. The difference is that they pay for their stories to be told. These stories border on the city, the dangerous, and the traumatic socio-existential tensions that characterize the miasma of African metropolitan life (Okome 2002). Also, because the marketers deal with the distributors, who in turn have direct contact with the exhibitors or video club owners, they claim to have direct access to reactions from the audience. They maintain they know which stories sell and which do not; hence they sponsor only scripts whose stories they imagine are popular amongst the growing audience of video films.

The marketers are influential even to the point of determining the cast of particular video films.[17] This accounts for the recurrent faces that we encounter in many of these films. In some cases, the marketers buy off all rights and credits to a film. They thus become producer, scriptwriter, director, and so forth, while their family members assume different roles in a film for which they never even went to the shooting location for an hour. Opportunistic, chauvinistic, and patriarchal, they often discriminate against women in their funding. Emem Isong, a female Nigerian producer, confirmed this in an interview with Onookome Okome (2000:43-46). To date, the marketers still loom large in the video industry. Thus, the transition from ritual-dominated films, through the culture epics, to the present video films of violence, was to a large extent determined by the marketers. So long as this bourgeoning culture industry remains largely in the hands of private funding forces devoid of government support, very little can be done about the hegemonic grip of these marketers.

B. *Producers*: In many respects they are like marketers. The difference, however, is that a few of them are trained in the actual business of filmmaking and[18] some have their own production studios. A few examples will suffice—Tunde Kelani of Mainframe Studio, who is himself a trained cinematographer, Kenneth Nnebue, pioneer videographer in Nigeria, and, according to Jonathan Haynes (2000) "the clear headed" Amaka Igwe. These producers seek funds either from banks, corporate bodies, relatives, or any other avenues which may contribute to their productions.

Often, they function in double or even triple capacities—producer, scriptwriter, and director. As Tunde Kelani, one of the leading producer/directors informed me, "I just come across a story which I want to share with the cinema audience and I go ahead to do the story. That's all! You do not need to consult anybody before hand; neither do I need to submit my material to anybody. I'm free. Its all in an atmosphere of freedom" (Personal interview 2001). This declaration gives a precise picture of the latitude afforded by the Nigerian video environment. I leave you to assess the implication of this freedom for the content of the videos. Clearly the Nigerian video producer is in control of both the creative and the economic variables of his production.

Refined, in the context of the Nigerian (African) city that favors mediocrity and pretensions, educated, and basking in the tinsel that comes with participating in an emerging industry of stardom, most of these producers hobnob with the upwardly mobile urban classes. Their films, therefore, revolve around the vicissitudes of living in metropolitan areas.

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[17] Recently, the marketers banned the star actors and actresses in the industry such as Richard Mofe Damijo, Genevive Nnaji, Omotola Jolade, and others. For almost a year or so, no director was allowed to cast these embargoed actors/actresses due to standing instructions from the marketers. Only recently, as I read in the newspapers, has a truce begun.

[18] Most of the participants in the video industry are products of the departments of Drama or Theatre Arts, English, and Fine Arts in Nigerian universities.

They draw their stories from the familiar terrain of the urban *nouveau riche* (the new political elites, businessmen/women, etc.) with whom the filmmakers themselves have privileged encounters. The films are very popular amongst the working class because they provide something of a prism into the enviable world of the upper middle class, which is eventually what they aspire to join. The stories revolve around inheritance, high-class double deals, rituals, family feuds, the urban sex trade, and so on. Apart from the local audience at home, Nigerian nationals seeking greener pastures abroad also patronize these video films. For this diasporic video audience, the videos are a tableau vivante of the shifting socio-cultural phases of the country they have departed—perhaps out of sheer economic imperatives—yet are nostalgic about from far away in the "outpost of progress" (to borrow Conrad's phrase) in North America and Europe. The kinds of films churned out by the producers are therefore markedly different from those of core marketers, whose ultimate eye is on the huge profits they hope to garner from the market. In sum, while the producer/directors are highly influential in the industry, unlike the core marketers, they merge/confuse commerce with aesthetics.

(C). *Religion*: Here we will consider the influence of both Christianity and Islam, the two institutionalized religions in Nigeria.

1. The *Church:* In Nigeria**,** the history of the church's involvement in culture dates back to the colonial era. Ebun Clark (1980), using the case of Hubert Ogunde, has shown the role of the church in the emergence of earlier theatre culture in colonial Nigeria. In the case of cinema, Okome (1991) has illustrated quite clearly how the church has always recognized the persuasive potentials of film and often used it to proselytize. Yet the present dimension in the Nigeria video industry is different from the early proselytization agendas of white missionaries. Unlike their colonial counterparts, the Christian videos are not merely intended to evangelize in a "supposedly barren cultural [spiritual] landscape" (Okome and Haynes 1997: 29) but also to rationalize the root of contemporary human travails. According to Obododimma Oha "many Christian narratives foreground the conflict between God's forces and Satan's in the affairs of human beings. Secular human experiences are seen as reflections as well as aftermaths of spiritual Warfare" (192). In such a social dynamic, secular social problems such as joblessness, childlessness, disease, impotence, and so forth are elevated and assigned a spiritual rationale.

Pentecostal churches such as the Mount-Zion faith, the Redeemed Christian Ministries, Liberty Ministries are engaged in this kind of socio-religious economy. Even though the Catholic Church is not directly implicated in this new audio-visual fad, some of its adherents make films to espouse their patron saints and the persecution of their clergy.[19] The church videos have therefore become alternative means of broaching the difficulties associated with living in a post-colonial nation such as Nigeria, mired in an irretrievable quagmire of socio-economic straights. As these

[19] Video films such as *Father Tansi* or *Sisters on the run* justify this position.

new video genres are funded by the latest "charismatic/neo-Pentecostal" churches (Hacket 1998 & Marshall- Faterni 1998), they are (in both theme and content), largely moralistic. In fact, more often than not, the scripts emerge from the spiritual heads of the sponsoring church. The cast and crew are largely drawn from the church, with only a few major roles contracted out to stars in the video enclave. The church congregation provides an already-captive market.[20]

In a country beset with intractable socio-economic problems, the church has become the last hope of the people. In these darkest of times, the church promises hope and compensation for the privations of today. Herein lies the popularity of these films among the downtrodden. The church films, written, sponsored, and funded with church money tell stories that reflect the very teachings of their various denominations. Thus the church has also become another strong determinant of the contents of some Nigerian video films.

2. *Islam*: The dominant religion among the Hausas of northern Nigeria is Islam. Amongst this people, Islam is also a way of life. There rarely exists a polarity between indigenous Hausa culture and Islamic practices because Islam is both religion and culture at the same time. This is the cultural scenario that one finds in home video films that emerge from the northern part of Nigeria. Dul Johnson makes this point when he notes, "it is the pervasive presence of Islam as a way of life that gives the Hausa film its distinctive character" (202). Njoku Felix and Goyit B. have furthered this argument declaring that "It is worthy of note also that religion which sociologists say is the 'opium of the people'… seems to influence film producers from the North of the country a great deal" (24). But the point must be made that while it is true that videos from the north of Nigeria are in most cases intertwined with the promotion and propagation of Islamic culture and doctrines, there is yet no indication of the involvement of the Islamic mosques in the funding of these videos as we have seen in the case of Christian "halleluiah videos."[21]

Unlike the early years of the video phenomenon, video filmmaking in northern Nigeria is currently as vibrant an industry as that found in the southern belt of the country. The recent anthropological surveys of Brian Larkin (1997; 2000; 2003; 2004) show that video production in northern Nigeria has its own socio-cultural coordinates implicated in a complex global and local network of mass cultural production steeped in illegalities. Video production in the north is now caught up in the current global cultural flows highly influenced by mass media technology. Whilst it is still highly contoured by Islamic culture, video film production in northern Nigeria is not obviated from the unique trans-national cultural

[20] Helen Ukpabio, for instance, boasts of a followership of about five hundred thousand. The sales of her films usually begin from the church. Even if half this number buys each film she produces, she is sure to do better than the secular producer/director.

[21] This is a term used by Okome Onookome in his essay "Women, Religion and the Booming Nigerian Film Industry" to refer to films produced by the neo-Pentecostal churches such as Liberty Gospel Ministries.

dynamics occasioned by mass mediated messages through the super trans-Atlantic media highways.

Thematically, it is estimated that approximately seventy-five percent of Hausa video films revolve around romance and marriage. A large number of films from the north thematically orbit around love, inheritance, charms, land disputes, and so forth. This is, of course, a result of the contact with Arab civilization and other influences from South East Asia especially from India's Bollywood (Larkin 1997; 2003). For example, when the films do not bear any remote connection to Islam, they inevitably turn to the Indian Bollywood motifs such as music, dance, songs, etc. The specific content of films from the north of Nigeria must therefore be seen in the light of Islam and other global cultural influences especially from India. This in itself is not a negative cultural trend. Rather, it calls attention to the unique innovative character of the Nigerian video scene. It calls attention to the very ingenious ways in which this continental visual culture buys into the global culture of a postmodern/ postindustrial world and how it appropriates global culture for local ends.

D. ***Audience***: The Nigerian home video film audience is not a passive one—it is active. In fact, one can say that the thriving state of the video industry in Nigeria is not only traceable to the sheer commercial zealousness of the producers and marketers, but also the avid patronage that mass audiences have given it. Divided along social, cultural, and ethnic lines, these audiences see films as "rough drafts" of an unfolding social history. Through the videos, the capacious audience of the video culture constructs "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991) of fellow sufferers, dreamers, enemies, and so forth. As Okome (2000) has persuasively argued, through the videos as popular urban art in Africa, producers and audiences alike "name their sufferings."

Having spoken with a number of workers in the industry, I suggest it is fairly discernible that audiences, to a great extent, determine what these video filmmakers produce. A large percentage of the video film audience is made up of the urban poor who in turn constitute the large bulk of the lower working class. They include artisans and tradesmen, such as carpenters, mechanics, vulcanizers, touts, drivers, cleaners, laborers, and other unskilled labourers. These are the people who actually encounter the difficulties associated with post-colonial existence. They are the real victims of robbery and petty theft, harassment by state security agents, and often victims of ritual murders. The middle and upper classes stay secured and comfortable in the spoils of their ill-gotten wealth, continuously sustained by a devious and vicious continental political culture best described by Jean-Françoise Bayart as "the politics of the belly" (1993).

Stories of violence, ritual murder, unemployment, avarice, betrayals, are then popular fare amongst these audiences not because they relish the violent spectacles of the world of videos, but because the films are a tableaux of their current social conditions and also a reminder that society is aware of their plights, at least in so far as it is able to 'name' them. The stories are also popular because they serve to caution against the

desperation and restiveness of the working class. They narrate the dangerous outcomes of the recklessness of questing for wealth without labor. These are the kinds of stories heard in popular bars throughout the country. To a certain extent, the video films are visual versions of these popular bar tales. These visual tales generate some form of moral superiority amongst the common working class. They tend to remind and console the working class viewers that they are the last bastions of a nation's sense of morality and decency amid a thriving culture of social injustice, thievery, and general social and spiritual unrighteousness.

The lower classes cherish the fact that it is this filmic genre that recognizes and sympathizes with the present state of the downtrodden. To offer this audience an alternative staple of films would be economically unwise. To remain in the industry, the Nigerian videographer must continue to weigh the preference of the audience even at the risk of compromising refined cinematic taste. As Emen Isong noted, " . . . in other video films, I tried as much as possible to deviate from the normal Nigeria video films of magic, witchcraft and violence. The response from the audience tells me otherwise" (Okome 2000: 48). So the Nigerian video audience, outside the antics of the marketers and producers, is another strong determinant of the content of video films.

Conclusion

The Nigerian home moviemaker is one of the most ingenious artists in the world. Like his "Third Cinema" counterparts in South America, s/he is conscious of not only the austere circumstances under which s/he crafts his or her art, but also of how the culture thus purveyed speaks to immediate artistic constituencies in time and space. The video filmmaker is like someone who must walk to his/her house through a path littered with thorns and broken bottles, but who must leave home the next day in search of a means of subsistence. To survive, the Nigerian video filmmaker must continue to make films, yet in doing so, s/he must pander to the dictates of a myriad of forces, some within, and others without and beyond his/her control: government regulation (censorship), audience tastes, the marketer, the producer, religious constraints, ethnic considerations, and so forth. What we see as contemporary Nigerian video film is therefore an outcome of a pot-pourri of varied economic and socio-cultural influences, some visible, some invisible. The truth, however, at the risk of generating controversy, remains that the content of Nigerian movies is not entirely a product of government censorship.

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