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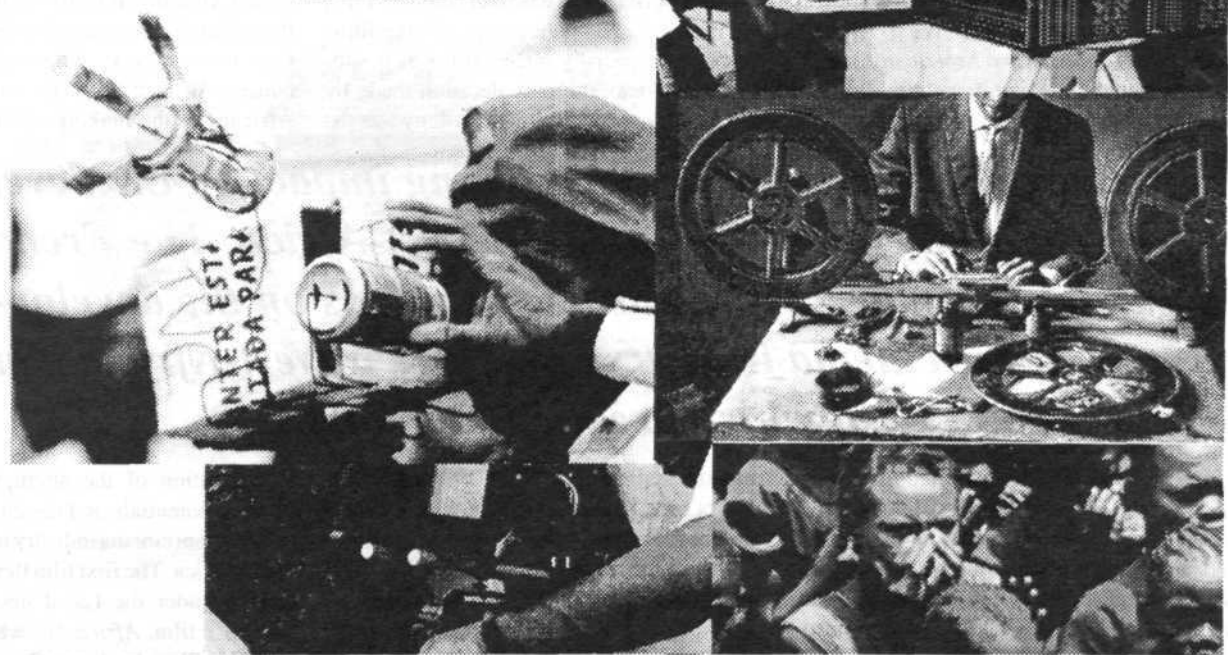
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film policy and the development of the AFRICAN CINEMA

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There are many rich cultural events in the West-African sub region. These multifaceted, multimedia and polyvocal cultural events have been recorded in this region in many anthropological studies and lately in studies dealing with performance and theatrical shows. Bakare Traore's book, *Black Africa Theatre* is one major example dealing with some of these artistic expressions. Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele's *Theatre in Africa* is another such book. Theatre in Africa, a collection of essays on ancient and contemporary artistic expression deals with the Nigerian state, otherwise, designated as an Anglophone state. These cultural expressions, referred to by Ogunba and Irele as 'veritable carnivals,' a phrase which Bakhtin

has upgraded from its folk root to the height of academic contemplation, may be said to be limited in scope as each ethnic group defines its space within this larger political configuration. The Egba (Yoruba), for instance, would restrict their artistic manifestation to their cultural history, so that this cultural expression is limited in scope. While its relevance in the totality of cultural manifestation is not in doubt, its significance is restricted to a defined ethnic unit. Such examples exist everywhere in the West African subregion. This is a region that is abundantly expressed in ethnic multiplicity.

But while this subregion has known many such cultural festivals, none of these festivals have proved to wield such momentous and stupendous influence on the people across

ethnic line, cultural divide, religious affiliations and political choices as the medium of cinema. This medium has come to mean so many things to so many people in this sub-continent. Like no artistic expression before its arrival, the cinema quickly moved from the periphery of the cultural life of these people to the centre. This movement was as swift as it was telling. Sembene Ousmane, the grand aesthete of this medium, has wonderful recollections of this medium in its early days; 'In the book on the history of cinematography, this part of Africa is *terra incognita*. In spite of their age, (African filmmakers) they have cleared the path with determination and a youth spirit'. What looked like a virgin area of artistic expression has now taken its own coloration. Sembene Ousmane knows this. He helped in

more than one way to make this possible. The rapid acceptance of this medium he makes obvious when he declares, 'Nowadays, there is not a single film festival without the participation of at least one film from us'. The cinema, according to him, is an evening school. This is the cinema which Clyde Taylor refers to as the 'Last cinema,' meaning that African cinema is the last to develop close links with its cultural and political roots. So far, in the last thirty years or so, a new cultural fact has emerged - the fact of our existence in the 'movies' or the flickers as the British would put it. Individually our response to this medium has been enthusiastic, almost frenzied in some place. From one West-African country to the other, the medium has grown tremendously. The subregion accepted the medium and the product which it sells; and inevitably accepted the content which the product brings to us. Because there was little control over what kind of films was initially brought to the West-African subregion, European and American distribution and exhibition cartels held the captive market spell-bound for a long time. These

authorities in West-Africa, the discussion of cinema development follows the colonial practice which Britain and France instituted upon the subcontinent. These policy options have had telling impact on the development of the cinema industry in West-Africa. The French system of indirect rule has telling effects on the development of the cinema industry and French West-Africa, some of which are lingering today. Indirect rule did provide a false situation of calm in which French West-Africans thought of themselves as French citizens and their capitals as satellites of Paris. The French were quite liberal about the regulation of the cinema industries in the colonies. For quite some time after effective colonisation, nothing was done to regulate what was shown to the local population. This assumption was that the population of the colony was one with that of France. As Diawara puts it, 'Unlike the British and the Belgians, who had colonial units, the French had no policy of producing films that were especially intended for their subjects in Africa. The only decision made by France concerning film in the colony was the

tion of African history and culture from a critical African perspective. This was not in favour of the colonialist discourse of Africans. The fear that this trend might negate the very crux of colonialism provided the schizophrenia which brought about the Laval decree. In this connection, therefore, the Laval decree was the direct result of certain anti-colonial slant in filmmaking of the 1920s and 1930s in French West-Africa, prominent among this small dissident group of filmmakers is Jean Rouch, the so-called father of African ethnographic films. Diawara aptly sums up this situation when he says the Laval decree was ... believed by many filmmakers of this period, including Jean Rouch, to be a design to postpone 'the birth of Francophone African cinema.' Jean Rouch himself has this to say of the Laval decree: 'the rule was practically never applied against French filmmakers, it served only as a pretext to very young Africans, judged to be too turbulent by the colonial administration, the right to film their own country'. That the Laval decree concerned itself with 'the creative role by Africans in the making of films' is a clear

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cartels distributed and exhibited their films in the West-African subregion; leaving little space for the development of an indigenous West-African cinema industry. Not long after the introduction of this medium into this region, the euphoria which attended its introduction began petering out, and a critical stance taken by a small class of people who saw beyond the glitter and gold of the silver screen. Independent artistic movements in the subregion added to this. Before long it became clear that there was the need to rewrite how cinema should operate and how people of the subregion ought to be represented. Sembene Ousmane, pioneer of African cinema, was one of those who looked beyond the glamour of the silver screen. And because colonial authorities and states of the West-African subregion had one form of cinema policy or the other in place, West-African filmmakers sought first and foremost to write-over these intimidating colonial policies which regulated cinema practice and other entertainment outlets.

implementation of a law in 1934 called La Décret Laval', the purpose of which was to control films that were shot in Africa and to minimise the creative roles taken by Africans in such productions. It is significant to point out that long before 1934 when the Laval decree was instituted and enforced, the British had established the notorious, 'The Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance of 1912'. This liberal attitude from the French chime simply with the indirect rule system, which sought to make Africans as French as possible. The assumption, I presume, was that the French colonialist did not have any need for separate legislation for the colonies because it was assumed that all legislations enforced in France automatically qualifies for the colonies. The 1934 La Décret Laval was therefore an after thought.

It is for this reason that I argue, for instance, that the Laval decree was concerned primarily with the content of films 'shot in Africa'. The need to control and regulate the content of films made in Africa was a direct way to control any strain of 'undue' re-interpretation

of the attempt to stifle the creative potentials and the emergence of an independent cinema industry in Francophone West-Africa. The first film that suffered censorship under the Laval decree is Robert Vantier's film, *Africa 50*, which was clandestinely filmed in Ivory Coast in the 1950s. The second film that got shot down by this decree was *Les Statues Une Aussi* made by the French new wave filmmakers, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais in 1955. Under this repressive turn of this decree, Pauline Vieyra, a graduate of Institute d' Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques (IDEHEC), the same film school where Nigeria's Ola Balogun trained in Paris, was also denied permission to film Africa.

France took on a total new attitude to the development of cinema culture in post-colonial era. In 1961, France inaugurated the Consortium Audio-visual International (C.A.I.). This organ was set up to help independent African nations to develop their cinema industries, stifled during colonialism. This sudden change in policy was not uncon-

As there were two distinct kinds of colonial

nected with the need to keep up with what was going on in the former colonies, although the public reason for setting up the C.A.I. was to help develop indigenous Francophone cinema industry. Obviously the French realised that the atonement they wish to show for the devastated entertainment industries in French West-Africa could work in their favour in more than one way.

Two names are consistent in the early subversion of the Laval decree: Jean Rouch and Jean-Rene Debrix. The role of both filmmakers in the development of Francophone West-African cinema is, to say the least, ambiguous, although I must say that they began the trend upon which future development was consolidated. 'As a potent organ of colonialism', to use Frank N. Ukadike's phrase, 'the earliest step towards a courageous portrayal of the African reality was by Mare Allegret's *Voyage on Congo* (1927), a non-cinematic record of Andre Gibe's travels in the Congo'. Since then there has been a spate of non African Africanists whose effort at defining the positive image of the continent and its people is worthy of note.

While I think it is important to call into focus the role of Jean Rouch, the ethnographic filmmaker, it is necessary to be cautious about the influence which his role in French West-Africa filmmaking has engendered. This cautious note is well recorded in Ukadike's encyclopaedic book, *Black African Cinema* 'Rouch and his ethnographic film expedition to Africa called into question the whole tradition of ethnographic filmmaking.' For Ukadike, ethnographic filmmaking represented a stage in colonial filmmaking in West-Africa, because like most European attitude to non-European world, extraneous critical criteria were brought to bear upon a set of cultural experiences that is not European. In Ukadike's assessment, the exotic in African cultures were emphasised in ethnographic films. Teshome Gabriel argues that this slant is obvious in the early films of Rouch, not in the later, more articulate and fine-tuned researches into the 'African mind', via 'the growing tendency to personalise and fictionalise.' However, Ukadike and Diawara agree

that Rouch's lasting and most telling contribution to Francophone filmmaking, indeed African filmmaking, is the access which his collaborative work with Africans gave to potential African filmmakers to work the technology of filmmaking. This was something denied Africans under the pernicious Laval decree.

The development of cinema in Francophone Africa took a new turn with the inauguration of the C.A.I. In 1963, Jean-Rene Debrix was appointed director of the newly created Bureau du Cinema at the Co-operation. Before this appointment, Debrix had worked in IDEHEC as adjunct director. His appointment to the top position in the C.A.I. proved as ambiguous as the effort of Jean Rouch in his ethnographic films in Africa. Before the appointment of Debrix, the emphasis of the



Ousmane Sembene(Left) and Idrissa Ouedraogo (right) Courtesy Of Christine Delorme.

French government through the C.A.I. was to help post colonial governments of Francophone Africa develop film units with the sole aim of producing newsreels and documentary. Debrix changed all that, arguing that the film will prove to be a useful way of telling the African story. In a very significant way, Debrix helped the development of the cinema in this subregion. There was, in Debrix's time at the co-operation, a radical neglect of the Laval decree.

The major criticism of Debrix's contribution to the development of Francophone cinema is that he arrogated so much to himself in the selection of what script to finance. He became the lord of the creative choice. The policy of the French government has not changed since Debrix's death in 1978. Fespaco, the biennial film festival Ouagadougou is a good case in point.

From the deliberations of Fespaci (Federation Panafrican de Cineastes), Fespaco came into existence in 1969. When it began in 1969, 'only five African and two European countries participated in the Festival Panafricain du Cinema de Ouagadougou.' Today, the Fespaco organisers have expanded the pan-African scope of the Festival's objectives. The 1995 edition was quite exquisite, extra-ordinary. With more than 10,000 delegates, the city of Ouagadougou witnessed a boom in everything - from sales of souvenir to the attendance boom at film screenings. The scope of its finances has been enlarged. In its early years of existence, Fespaco was almost solely supported by the French government. Owing to the dedication of its organisers more avenues of finance are opening up. The 1995 edition has a long list of such support.

Fespaco has no doubt energised film production, marketing and distribution in the West-African subregion. It has also opened up serious debate on the role of African filmmakers in shaping the future of Africa's culture and politics. This Fespaco has done in a very serious manner.

While some critics, especially critics and filmmakers

from Anglophone countries have argued that Fespaco presents and represents only French West-Africa, recently more countries from English speaking West-Africa have discovered the importance of this cultural festival to the continent. The Nigerian contingent, for instance, has attended the last two editions of Fespaco - 1993 and 1995. In a discussion with Malam Breudam Shehu at the 1995 edition of Fespaco, the Managing Director of the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) made the point that Fespaco is a very significant cultural event. He did say that there were organisational lapses here and there, but by and large, he is of the opinion that Fespaco is something worthy of emulation. A number of English speaking African films have won prizes at Fespaco.

The significance of Fespaco is therefore not restricted to French West-Africa, but to Af-

rica as a whole. It may have benefited French West-Africa most, but this is inevitable. It started there and was painstakingly nurtured by the governments and people of the countries within this block.

The case of the development of the cinema industry in English West-Africa is different. Some Anglophone countries have only begun to encourage film production, distribution and exhibition. The governments are only beginning to take nominal interest in the industry. The cinema industry is not organised on a sub-regional level as it began in colonial French West-Africa. Infrastructure is weak and finance none existent. The existence of the industry in the different nations, especially Ghana and Nigeria, is only assured by the doggedness of independent filmmakers. The historical precedence is, of course, very crucial. Colonial Britain did not encourage film production in her colonies.

I propose to discuss in some detail the content of all the policies on film that Nigeria has enacted since 1912 when the first policy came into existence. In addition, I will examine the impact of these policies on the development of film in Nigeria and on the Nigerian film, and the short-comings of these policies. Nigeria presents an interesting picture of colonial attitude to the development of the cinema in Anglophone West Africa.

I have identified the period in which the first film was screened, 1903 to the late 1950s, as the first phase of the film in Nigeria. Let us refer to this period as the crude era, not simply because indigenous production was at its foetal stages, but also because indigenous infrastructure did not exist. The second period began in the late 60s and then established itself as an emergent film tradition in the 70s with the release of *Kongi's Harvest* in 1970. I wish to designate this period as the beginning of Nigerian films: for it was from this period that we began to feel the tempo and temperament of indigenous cultural patterns in the body of the Nigerian film. Here, too, film as a cultural fact began to take indigenous habits into consideration. The contingency of the production of films during this period may, of course, be sourced partially in that of the first period that I have identified, but it is clear that a new apprehension of the medium and its potential in Nigerian took off. The third period which, by its indexical, iconic, and productional criteria, belongs to the crucial period of the Nigerian film, began when the age-long practices of the theatre of the southern Yoruba country was transformed into the medium of film. This started in the mid-70s and became significant in the tableaux of the Nigerian cinema with the release of *Aiye* in 1979.

Each of these periods of the film in Nigeria

has its own film culture derived from the complex interplay of the distribution, exhibition and production of films and the pattern of audience responses vis-a-vis the content, timing, ideology and ethnic peculiarity.

My analysis of these policies and how the political contingencies of their various periods empower (or disempower) this medium would soon make this point clear. Suffice it to say that a film culture is born partly out of the perceived role and place of the film within a given society by individuals living within it, and it is this relationship that partly determines the cadence of film production.

In the history of the film in Nigeria, we have had three policies specifically designed and promulgated to regulate, encourage and shape the film environment.

They are: the Theatre and public Performance Regulation Ordinance, 1912; the Cinematography Act (1963); and the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) Decree (1979).

However, there are other cultural documents that have been promulgated which may have been designed to further the aim and aspirations of film and cinema in the cultural landscape.

These are: the Nigerian Enterprise Promo-



On the location of the film *Orun Mooru*



John Sekka (left) and the late Orlando Martins in the film *Things Fall Apart* produced by Calpenny Company.

tion Degree No.4 (1972); the Mass Communication Policy (1987); the Cultural Policy (1989); and the Copyright Policy (1989).

In one way or another, these policies have been promulgated to cater for a viable entertainment environment which favours the growth and expansion of the film and its potentials in Nigeria, but the content, bias and direction which each of these policies assumed depended more on the ideological persuasion of the government that issued them.

The first film policy was 'The Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance of 1912. This law, according to Onyero Mgbejume, was 'proposed and published in the government gazette, ready to be introduced into the legislative council of Nigeria in 1912. However, there was public resentment over the idea of regulation and licensing the new industry for reasons to be discussed'. Although this act failed to reach the legislative council according to Mgbejume, the first Cinematographic Ordinance Act (No. 20) was passed by the Council. Going by the submission of Mgbejume, the 1912 Act was not the first regulating document in the Nigerian film environment, since it was not passed into law. However, he is of the opinion that in 1933, the 'first' Cinematographic Ordinance No. 20 was passed by the legislative assembly.

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Entitled, 'An Ordinance for the Better Regulation and Control of Cinematograph and Similar Exhibition and Purpose Connected There', it was applied to both the Lagos Colony and the rest of Nigeria. This Ordinance was the first in the industry to specifically create a censorship board and a censorship committee to determine the kind of films that were exhibited to the local population. Among the provisions set out in this Ordinance were that:

- (i) It was unlawful to show films on unlicensed premises;
- (ii) Licenses were not to be granted unless government was satisfied about the suitability and safety of the proposed premises;
- (iii) During the time films were being shown, government officials must be allowed in to ensure that there was no potential danger which might be caused by fire;
- (iv) The Censorship Board include the Director of Education and ten other persons appointed by the Governor;
- (v) The Board was empowered to appoints from time, to time Censorship Committee;
- (vi) Films and posters were not allowed to be displayed unless approval had been given;
- (vii) The Committee was empowered to screen films and examine posters;
- (viii) Owners of censored films have the right to appeal for further hearing; and
- (ix) Private home movies were not covered by the law.

The 1933 Cinematographic Ordinance, Mgbejume tells us, underwent series of mutations, first in 1934 when it was radically redefined in many respects; in 1941, 1944 and 1964.

Properly considered, therefore, the 1963 Cinematography Act is actually an advancement of the 1933 Cinematographic Ordinance which regulated the film environment during the early days of film in Nigeria.

Although Hyginus Ekwuazi contests the fact that the 1912 Ordinance Act was not passed

into law, thereby making it the first of such laws passed in this country which regulated entertainment, a critical examination of both the 1912 and 1933 which underwent mutation into the 1963 Cinematographic shows that their contents are not altogether different. Perhaps the point I should make here is that the 1933 Act was, in fact, an improvement of the 1912 'Theatre and Public Performance Act' For as Ekwuazi points out, 'The Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance' has two parts: 'The first which dealt with issues of license as it affected the venue: by this, stage plays (and this included the cinematographic) could be exhibited only in such buildings as were duly licensed for such performances. Otherwise, the exhibitor incurred a penalty of N20 (then equivalent of about N40) for each day of performance. The other part of the Ordinance mandated that for a license of exhibition to be granted for any such performance, a detailed description of the play was to be furnished to the licensing officer infringement of this attracted a fine of #50 (then about N100) (1990:4).'

Both Ordinances, in various guises, manifested the latent political interest of imperialist ideology.

These Ordinances removed the sphere of actual production from indigenous peoples. Ekwuazi makes this point when he asserts that: 'From scripting and directing, through shooting to editing and sounding, Africans featured only in significantly minor roles. Even when traditional African stories were solicited for scripting such stories ended up being slanted to reflect the stance, the bias and predilection of the producer (the CFU): production policies were formulated over and above the heads of Africans for whom and with whom the films were made.'

The shortcomings of these Ordinances, inimical to the even development of indigenous film production, were therefore inscribed in both documents. But while these Ordinances did not favour the even development of all aspects of the film in Colonial Nigeria, both Ordinances were harsh on the feature (narrative) film. Ostensibly, because colonial cinema was based on the ideological practice which sought to further a discourse pattern which favoured and legitimised colonialism, the documentary genre was favoured.

From the reading of both Ordinances, two points stand out clear. First, the attempt to keep the local population outside the entertainment arena, and secondly, the expediency to develop only those facets of the

industry that the colonialist thought favourable to his ideological practice. Situated within this practice was the pernicious distortion of the *Blackbody*. The *Blackbody* in these films featured not as signifier of autonomous authority, but as a vast untraversed map, a territory waiting to be inscribed upon.

The implementation of these Ordinances and the implicit colonialist discourse therein brought further a film culture in the early part of the development of film in Nigeria that was (and still is) ambivalent, alien and inconsequential to the cultural roots of the indigenous population. An attitude to film icon became the vogue: that attitude which the indigene took to the film image as some fictive interpretation that lacked any significant anchor in real life. The shortfall of this attitude is with us today. We have not totally imbibed the film image as an approximation to the life we crave for, the whole complex machinery of cinema as an image-making factory, at least not when it tells about us. By entrenching the filmic image that is far-fetched to the aspiration of the local population, early cinema in Nigeria demobilised its potency. It became elitist, bourgeois.

The content of 'The Theatre and Public Performance Ordinance' and 'An Ordinance of The Better Regulation and Control of Cinematograph and Similar Exhibition and Purposes Connected Therewith' fostered this culture and encouraged parochial cinema development in colonial Nigeria.

No doubt, the 1963 Cinematograph Act is a carry over from the legacy of colonial cinema. It bears the imprints and pretensions of colonial cinema in its operation and in the negation of significant approval of the local population for which it was adapted. Indeed, someone has ventured to say that it is a copy of the Cinematograph Act of England. If it is, then, the wholesale adoption gave it a biased slant, and made it, from the very beginning of its operation, inadequate.

However, I think it would be useful to look at the Act closely and show why it became inadequate in this society, and why the Nigerian Film Corporation Decree of 1979 became inevitable.

First, this Act, like the ones that came before, empowers the Minister of Information to constitute a Board of Censors. This Board is thereafter put in the position to censor films that are produced and exhibited in Nigeria and those imported into the country. The Board, this Act glibly states, should comprise 'fit persons and organisations repre-

senting the thought and opinions of persons resident in Nigeria'. The vagueness of this term of reference is of course not lost to us. How does one determine the 'fitness of people' who ought to censor films meant for public consumption? Who determines the fitness of the members of this Board?

Ekwuazi illustrates the problem of such ambiguous terms and shows the formation of three such Boards, pointing out how these loosely defined terms of reference could be read from different positions of bias. These biased readings were, according to Ekwuazi, apparent in the constituted Boards of 1959, 1971 and 1977. Supporting his claims with the University of Lagos study, he concludes that the Boards constituted for 1971 and 1977 were made up of members over 40 years of age and goes on to point out the paternalism that such bias caused in the development of the film industry and in the culture of the film audience. It is significant to point here that the research which Ekwuazi (1984) undertook, entitled 'Findings from the Lagos and Ibadan Cinema Audience Surveys' and that of Onookome Okome (1990) entitled 'The Sociology of the Folkloric Cinema in Nigeria' show clearly that the major patrons of Nigerian Cinema are found among teenagers. The group constitutes more than sixty per cent (60%) of the total film-going audience. As Ekwuazi points out in his study, this age bracket was born in the film era - the global film culture. The Boards constituted in 1971 and 1977 would have ignored this important variable in their deliberation. Apart from these Boards, there have been ad hoc Boards created at irregular interval, but there is no evidence to show that they surmounted this problem that we stated here.

A second problem is the criteria under which the Board would grant a film screening licence. Approval would not be given under these conditions: undermine national security; induce or reinforce corruption of private or public morally; encourage illegal and criminal acts; expose peoples of African descent to ridicule and contempt; and encourage racial, religious and ethnic discrimination and conflict. (Ekwuazi, 1991).

Although the Board is vested with the power of censoring both domestic and imported films, there is a portion in the Act which effectively delimits the Board's sphere of influence. This section excludes certain classes of cinematographic films from being censored. These are short films that take no longer than five minutes to exhibit, such as 8mm films and 'any film imported, produced and issued by the direction of the govern-

ment of the federation or any state; the diplomatic representative of any commonwealth or foreign country, the United Organisation or any organ of that organisation or any educational, scientific or cultural body or society, including broadcasting and television organisation'.

The problems inherent here are enormous. The vagueness of the term 'imported films' that is kept outside the Board's power is a negation of national security and may be a source of the denigration of our cultural value as recent events have shown. This is a big gap. It is equally amazing why the 8mm film is excluded from censorship. If we realised the potential of this film gauge in the experimental work of foreigners on our land, the dimension of distorted images encased in them, then this particular condition becomes a serious oversight or a deliberate copy of colonial cinema which the adopters of this colonial Act failed to see.

Lastly, the provision that stipulates the punishment of offences committed is rather mild. Besides, since there was no monitoring arm in the Ministry of Information, this Act became only a piece of 'government paper', as the saying goes. It did not touch the average film goer or the exhibitor. Furthermore, as the Board and its parent body never exercised any control over the importation of film, it was doubtful if they had any input in the actualisation of the Act in this direction. They never had. The evidence before us shows that the importation of films soared in the 70s and even the Nigerian Film Distribution Company (NFDC) imported foreign films for screening, about 80 per cent of total screen schedule between January and December 1982. If we put this together with the nefarious activities of Lebanese businessmen in the film exhibition and distribution network and the activities of AMPECA, the situation became rather pathetic - a massive influx of foreign films which the Censorship Board had no direct control over. It must be added here that the influx of video machines and satellite dishes made the censorship climate even more porous.

The call for restatement of government on policy matters and the encouragement of the film industry as an indigenous form of entertainment predated the 1979 seminar on film and culture organised by the National Council for Art and Culture, Lagos. However, it was the culmination of the call to create a

body which should take charge of this important aspect of our cultural life. In any case, this call was a recognition of the inadequacies and failures of former legislations. From the beginning, therefore, the Nigerian Film Corporation Decree was faced with an enormous task. It had to shed the appendages of colonial cinema and then set the pace by its own agenda for indigenous film production in Nigeria.

To this end, the Nigerian Film Corporation Decree has made significant progress. The Decree enlarged the narrow interest group formation of the 1963 Cinematograph Act to include specialists in performance, literary and cultural activities as members of the Board. It also includes indigenous filmmakers for the first time. Properly indigenised, the Corporation was inaugurated to carry out these functions.

- (a) the production of films for domestic consumption and for export;
- (b) the establishment and maintenance of facilities for film production;
- (c) the encouragement of production by Nigerians of film through financial and other forms of assistance;
- (d) the encouragement of the development of cinematographic theatres by Nigerian by way of financial and other forms of assistance;
- (e) the acquisition and distribution of films;
- (f) the provision of facilities for training and advancing the skills and talents of persons employed in the Nigerian film industry generally and the conduct of research into the matters pertaining to film production and the film industry as a whole; and
- (g) the carrying out of such activities as may be necessary or expedient for the full discharge of all or any of the functions conferred on it under or pursuant to this Decree (Nigerian Film Corporation Decree, 1979, No. 61; p. A430).

Undoubtedly, these are laudable goals. In fact, the Decree is a timely re-writing of the film industry. Apart from the resuscitation of the place of the indigenous filmmaker in the

tableaux of the Nigerian film, four of the functions are particularly noteworthy: the establishment and maintenance of facilities for film production; the encouragement of the development of cinematography theatres by Nigerians by way of financial and other assistance; the establishment and maintenance of a national film archive, and the provision of training and advancing the skills and talents of persons employed in the Nigerian film industry.

There is no doubt that the most outstanding problem militating against the viable production aspect of the film industry is the lack or total absence of film production infrastructural units such as laboratories, editing studios, etc. It would be recalled that the situation was so acute that Sanya Dosunmu, a filmmaker, began setting up his film laboratory in the 70s, but he was soon priced out of business as he found out that cost of equipment escalated all too often. The Decree took cognisance of this. And the Film Corporation under the leadership of Shehu Brendan has seen to it that these infrastructural units are put in place. Although it is not clear if the Corporation has done anything to encourage indigenous ownership of cinema exhibitions halls, it is hoped that it will in due course.

In any case, it would be necessary to increase the frequency of indigenous film production before engaging in this aspect of the provision of the Decree because an increase in local films will justify money spent on local film halls by business people. Although it is not clear if this is the attitude which the Corporation holds, one cannot but hold the opinion that this may well serve its purpose.

Perhaps the finest provision of the function of the Corporation is that which emphasises the setting up of a film archive. The significance of this provision places, on a very comfortable place, the cultural dimension of film, a popular medium in Nigeria, as it is elsewhere. I have argued elsewhere that as a means of reconstructing political, cultural and social history, film archives are indispensable. This is especially so in a society such as ours where there is an acute lack of documentation. The 1979 Decree which set up the Nigerian Film Corporation settled this matter and the administrative machinery saw to its implementation.

It is also noteworthy to point out that this Decree also made provision for the training of those engaged in the industry. This provi-

sion has not been quite put to test. The reason, I presume, has to do with the fact that the Corporation has not set up its academy. Such an academy would, when operational, take care of training staff and other categories of workers in the industry.

There is no doubting the fact that the 1979 Decree which set up the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) began a new phrase in the history of the Nigerian cinema. So far, it has been the most practical and result-oriented. It has, as I have pointed out, rewritten the place of film in Nigeria. More than anything else, the execution of the functions assigned to the NFC has carried forward the aspiration of this Decree, especially the years beginning from 1985 to date.

I have discussed the 1912, 1963 and 1979 legislations as they affect the development of the film industry in some detail, but while I have dealt with the first two as documents, I have consciously read the last (1979) as both a document and a realisation. The reason for this is obvious. Until now, the only legislation that carried within its written (theoretical) outlook a comprehensive unambiguous framework is the 1979 Decree. Besides, at the level of implementation, the success recorded so far in less than a decade far outruns whatever gains the practice of the other two legislations could garner. Backed by the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree of 1972, and the indigenisation euphoria of the period, the brains behind the 1979 Film Decree came up with a near perfect master plan.

Both the Mass Communication Policy (1967) and the National Cultural Policy (1989) have similar content. They are declamatorily complimentary to the 1979 Decree. While the 1979 Decree establishing the Nigerian Film Corporation emphasises the creation, maintenance and sustenance of structures within the film industry, the Mass Communication Policy and the National Cultural Policy do no more than spell out the role of film in national development. In fact, the Communication Policy even specifies the role of the NFC: the body that is saddled with the functions of providing basic infrastructural facilities for the industry. It is also important to point out that the Copyright Law (Decree No 47 of December, 1988) of Nigeria recognises the eligibility of the cinematograph for copyright.

Although I have argued here that the NFC pushed the film industry a step further, and that the import of this push may become more evident in a couple of years, certain comments and suggestions are necessary at



Oumarou Ganda (right) in *L'exile* (1981)

this point.

I find that the provisions outlining functions for the NFC do not include the duties of censoring films distributed, exhibited, and produced locally and internationally. For the reason that Nigerian film going audience has been weaned on foreign films, and for the reason that what the industry should highlight the cultural, social and political values of the nation, it is essential that a definite policy of censorship be inaugurated. Of course, this call has been forcefully put in a document: a draft film policy. One or two comments, I believe, are in order here.

In trying to correct the shortfalls of the 1963 Cinematographic Act, this policy document suggests among other things the streamlining of the regulations of the Censorship Board and its functions into one set of rules for the Federation (p. 23), the upgradation of the penalty stipulation for infringement of the rules, the establishment of zonal branches in Lagos, Kano, Port-Harcourt and Yola, and that the secretary to the Board should come from the NFC.

The functions which this policy ascribes to the Board are quite exhaustive, comprehensive and well-meaning, but the suggestion that every zonal branch should determine its own rules of infringement is a negation of the centrality of the Board of Censors in the scheme of things. This bogus autonomy might even cause problems. Furthermore, I think the NFC should fully take charge of the Censors Board. For if the functions of the NFC are set right and realised in due course, it would be in a position to provide the necessary data for the judgement that the Censorship Board would base its wisdom.

The idea of the establishment of film societies and other voluntary film associations is laudable, but the operational bases should

move into the schools (Primary, Secondary, Colleges and Universities) where film clubs should be encouraged and public screening of significant national films are done at regular intervals. The extension of exhibitions into the rural areas of the country by means of mobile vans should be encouraged.

The development of the cinema industry in West-Africa is therefore a study of the difference in the history of colonial practices in the subregion as well as the enthusiasm of post-colonial governments in the face of paucity of resources and/or sheer neglect of this cultural means of articulating national *differences*.

While French West-Africa, through the help of France and other willing international bodies, has been able to establish and strengthen an important international sub-regional film festival, Fespaco, a cultural event which calls attention to films made in Africa biennially, no English speaking West-African nation has come near the magnitude of the organisational zeal of Fespaco. But this has little effect on the product of the cinema industry in Anglophone West-Africa. Many Anglophone films have won prizes at international film festivals. Kwaw Ansah's *Love Brewed in An African Pot* and Ola Balogun's *Black Goddess* are some examples. Anglophone films have also won prizes at Fespaco meetings. Only recently, the Nigerian Film Corporation has tried to promote the place of the cinema industry in Nigeria's cultural life. The NFC organised its first Film Festival from December 9- 12, 1992. Nowhere near the grandeur of Fespaco, the first Nigerian Film Festival was understandably national in outlook. In a significant way, this festival has started the industry on the right footing. Since this festival, no one is left in doubt as to the potentials and enthusiasm of the Nigerian audience. **GR**