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Media Markets Monographs. Sub-Saharan African Cinema: Influences and Prospects

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African cinema has, in recent times, attracted and continues to attract interest from diverse quarters – academia, development agencies, businessmen and even film practitioners from both within and outside the continent. The attraction, among other things, can be attributed to the dynamic nature of the film industries within the African cinema, especially the sub-Saharan region of the continent with the Nigerian film industry symbolising this dynamism. However, to informedly understand the current state of the sub-Saharan African cinema, one needs to fully grasp its history and the various factors/events/individuals that have influenced this current phenomenon. History, they say, helps to understand the past, appreciate the present and predict the future. It was Confucius who said “study the past if you would define the future.” This is exactly what the book, *Sub-Saharan African Cinema: Influences and Prospects*, has presented.

The book is a historiographic presentation of events that influenced and led to the creation and the subsequent development of the sub-Saharan African cinema, starting from the colonial era to the post-independence era. This was cleverly explored by breaking the sub-Saharan Africa into different formations – Francophone, Anglophone, the Belgian Congo and the Lusophone Africa.

The book starts by establishing a background to the recency of the sub-Saharan African cinema, which only commenced in the late 20th century. It continues with the debate around the term African cinema that some have argued does not exist; it then assesses the current state of sub-Saharan African cinema, which is currently largely characterised by video film production but actually begun with celluloid film production. That transition from celluloid into video film production did not just occur by happenstance; some factors triggered it. Obiaya does well to reveal some of those factors in a simple and unambiguous manner.

Recognising filmmaking as a business endeavour, the second chapter of the book provides a theoretical perspective and its relevance to the historical development of the sub-Saharan African cinema. Here we see a conjoint of economics and film studies, which gives the book a rather fascinating twist. The media economics theory is introduced to explain how finance, distribution channels, the behaviour of the market, and the preferences of the consumers, among other factors, have influenced the sub-Saharan African cinema. Extending the economics assortment in his analysis, Obiaya introduces the Structure, Conduct and Performance model of micro economic theory to assess the progression of the sub-Saharan African cinema and appraise the set responsibilities and performance of the key actors in the cinema business.

Having situated his thesis within a befitting theoretical construct, Obiaya considers the colonial influence on what could now be referred to as the sub-Saharan African cinema. We see how the British colonialists used the Colonial Film Unit in the west and east African countries, and the Central African Film Unit in the central African countries. Similarly, an insightful account of how France introduced film into the Francophone countries as part of its mission civilisatrice is also presented in addition to the roles of Belgium and Portugal in their respective colonies. The book shows how some of these colonialists still influence the film industries in some of the colonies even after independence. Eventually, economic and political crises halted the growth of the cinema in many of these countries. And that gave birth to video film production.

The book presents a historical background of the video film experiment in Nigeria and how a creative response to economic crisis at the time has now become the frontrunner and pacesetter for African cinema with many African countries embracing this ingenuity as a way to grow their respective film industries.

On the whole, a critical analysis of the book shows a seamless entwining of the evolution of the sub-Saharan African cinema from the colonial era, which was characterised by celluloid production – documentary, newsreels, short films – and the post-independence era, which was initially characterised by celluloid productions, then transited to video film production, which has now become the hallmark of the sub-Saharan African cinema. A point to note from the book is

how government/political actors influenced the sub-Saharan African cinema during the colonial era, and how the businessmen exploit the presence/absence of government policies during the post-independence era. Suffice it to say that, in the Nigerian case, government seems to have been completely absent in the cinema business except for the interventions by Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan in 2004 and 2010 respectively. As posited by Obiaya, the more recent era of video production has seen the ambivalent marketers (their entrance has also presented the burden of piracy) and the video technology as the major influences on the sub-Saharan African cinema.

The book is quite short, but it can be described as a typical representation of an expansive body of work given its content. The quality of scholarly apparatus employed by the author to advance his argument gives the book a status of wholeness with respect to the history of sub-Saharan African cinema.

That the author is able to capture the progression of film development in key film industries in the Sub-Saharan African is a commendable display of scholarship. The arrangement of thought, neatness, clarity and presentation style of the book presupposes the author's intention to make it an easy read for every film scholar/student.

For a book published in 2016, a shortcoming will be the scarce attention given to more recent events in sub-Saharan African cinema such as the expansion in cinema houses, and the recent blockbuster movies that have surpassed existing box office records, especially in Nigeria. These factors surely have had some influence on the sub-Saharan African cinema, and they have not been sufficiently captured in the book. Similarly, the impact of the missionaries on film development in sub-Saharan Africa is not sufficiently captured. Then again, one can pardon this exclusion considering that it is only a one hundred and seven pages book.

Inasmuch as the author may not have adequately captured the prospects of the sub-Saharan African cinema as reflected in the title of the book, commendation must be given on the author's account of historical influences on the sub-Saharan African cinema. It is a book for every film historian, film scholar and researcher that is interested in the development of what is now known as sub-Saharan African cinema as proposed by the author.

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