

Emergence of Local Language Film Production in Ghana

Film production in Ghana dates back to the colonial era, in 1946, when the Gold Coast Film Unit was established to make films in aid of governance. Educational films, documentaries and features were produced by the unit under Sean Graham, a British producer/director and his team of locally-trained pioneer filmmakers including Reynold Ofoe Fenuku, Samuel Aryeetey and Bob Okanta. Productions were aimed among others at creating awareness of one's civic responsibilities in paying taxes and maintaining good hygienic practices to promote public health care. One major production of the Gold Coast Film Unit was *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952). In this film, a young boy, Kumasenu, drifts from the village to the city of Accra and encounters problems. A gang he joins involves him among other social vices in robbery, alcohol and smoking. One of their robbery acts goes wrong and they are caught by the police. The film was meant to sensitise people to the dangers of the youth drifting from rural to urban areas. At the end of the film, Kumasenu escapes going to prison on condition that he is returned to the village to continue his life of fishing. This film uses local languages in some parts but with English voice-overs. Stylistically, the film is presented more like a documentary than a feature. Some scenes like coconut tree climbing, sea waves breaking on the sandy beach could best be described as "touristic".

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After independence in 1957, the unit was restructured and renamed the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC), and continued operations, producing features and short newsreels that preceded full-length feature screenings in the state-owned cinema theatres. I argue that up until this point, cinema in Ghana had emerged as part of governance. President Nkrumah made sure that a camera crew followed him wherever he went and documented his activities, which served as materials for news reportage of his political endeavours both locally and internationally. GFIC was well equipped and the staff was trained in India and Eastern Europe through inter-government co-operations. After the military overthrow of the government in 1966, the corporation was tagged as a propaganda machinery of Nkrumah and was neglected by successive regimes until 1995 when it was sold to a Ghana-Malaysian consortium under the Divestiture Implementation Programme and renamed GAMA Films Company (see Aveh, 2010).

Films produced under GFIC were all in English, except for *I Told You So* (1970) which is in Fante, a local language. It features Lord Bob Cole

and his Jaguar Jokers Concert Party theatre group. "Concert party" is the term used for itinerant popular theatre groups who toured the country, performing improvised melodramas in local languages mainly Twi (Akan), in the 60s and 70s. Their acts incorporated highlife musical performances, interspersed with stand-up comedy skits by their star comedian followed by the main drama (see Cole, 2001). In *I Told You So* (1970), Bob Cole plays the father whose caution to a daughter on the choice of a husband is ignored. In the end a rich stranger that the young lady falls in love with (with the tacit support of her mother and uncle) turns out to be a wanted criminal who gets arrested by the police at the climax of the wedding ceremony. The film highlights generational conflict arising out of differences in attitude towards the process of marriage. As a social drama devoid of the usual cinematic visual effects and dazzling stunts coupled with the use of a local language with several lessons for both the young and the old, the film drew large audiences to its screenings for many years. I argue that this success contributed to the emergence of "Kumawood" in Ghana several decades later.

As if cursed to lag behind, emerging film industries in some countries are struggling to define their identities by tagging Hollywood through coining names. Thus several "woods" are emerging, especially

in Africa. There is Nollywood in Nigeria, Riverwood in Kenya, Bongowood in Tanzania, and Ugawood in Uganda. In Ghana whereas the English language films produced by some filmmakers are labelled “Ghallywood”, the Twi language films are identified as “Kumawood”. It is interesting to note that both names originated as sole proprietorship business enterprise names before being adopted to cover an industry. This was without its controversies, however. (see Aveh 2014).

Independent film production in Ghana was spearheaded by Kwaw Ansah with his film *Love Brewed in an African Pot* (1980) ably supported by King Ampaw’s *Kukurantumi Road to Accra* (1983) and *Juju* (also known as *Nana Akoto*) (1985). Ansah went on to release the award-winning *Heritage Africa* in 1988.¹ It must be noted that filmmaking during this period in Ghana was primarily undertaken with state support by GFIC and some international collaborations for some titles. Thus, with economic downturn in the early 1980s, dwindling state funding saw a near collapse of the industry as facilities became obsolete. This era ushered in the popular video film phenomenon where film enthusiasts using consumer home electronic products shot films cheaply on magnetic tape instead of celluloid (see Aveh 2014; Diawara 2010). This period saw the emergence of video cassette rental outlets and screening centres basically set up with an average-sized television monitor equipped with a VCR. Foreign movies dominated the screens, but local entrepreneurs began to establish production companies that produced local films. The video film phenomenon was dominated by people with little or no training in film production

enthusiastically conceiving a story and putting together a cast for a movie shoot. Though replete with technical challenges, the productions were popular for several reasons, including the kind of English spoken which the average Ghanaian could grasp. It was when professional filmmakers embraced the video technology that the industry saw some improvement in the standard of production.

The coming of Kumawood at the turn of the millennium took the local production to a different level through featuring popular Concert Party stars; telling more local stories; using familiar neighbourhoods as shooting locations and above all using Twi which is widely understood across the country despite the multiplicity of ethnic groups with many indigenous languages. Sources of the stories for the films range from myths and legends in oral traditions to contemporary everyday occurrences making media headlines. The star system also contributed to the rise of Kumawood with names like Agya Koo (real name Kofi Adu), coming from the Concert Party tradition as an award-winning stand-up comedian. His jokes and antics make his films hilarious. He is ably supported by Akrobeto (real name Akwasi Boadi), Kyeiwaa (real name Rose Mensah), Kwaku Manu, Nana Ama McBrown and Lil Win (real name Kwadwo Nkansah). These are currently common household faces as they appear daily on the screens.

Kumawood, I argue, is not in competition with any other industry but within itself with producers jostling to outdo each other, racing to produce movies based on trending issues and headline stories in Ghanaian media. Publicity on upcoming productions is sometimes released before the cast and crew are assembled to go on location shoots.

Some rivalry developed between Agya Koo and Lil Win when the latter became popular leading to the diminishing presence of the former. That is normal in the industry where new faces come to overshadow older ones until they eventually fade out. Viewers’ debates centred on comparing performance styles of the two, especially in terms of displaying funny antics. Lil Win however added music and dance to his performances by featuring in music video releases by some popular artistes.

Kumawood’s popularity has been boosted by controversies surrounding some of the releases. Whereas many of the film titles sound familiar because they are linked to trending issues and stories as already indicated, the contents of the movies have often no correlation at all to factual events.² Viewers are baited to buy the movies only to discover, to their disappointment, that the stories contained in there are not what were expected. Some politically-charged titles also led to conflicts with state security.³

The critical debates on Kumawood take place within academic and professional circles especially with reference to the handling of the cinematic technique. Kumawood’s production process of seemingly not using written scripts has been trending in recent discussions.⁴ It must be noted that Kumawood producers are generally seen on shooting sets and locations without full scripts. The key factor here is both directors’ and actors’ inability to read Twi as many people can speak the language but cannot write or read it. People who are very literate in Twi might also not have the performance skills and abilities required for a film role. There are very good Twi readers who present news in Twi on some local radio and television channels.

The inability to use written scripts means directors work out scenarios with actors as they improvise dialogues during shooting. This calls for a two-camera shooting style in order to get shot variations as re-takes of scenes from different angles or re-framing shots become difficult as actors repeating exchanges that they created on the spur of the moment become impossible. Some producers are unable to afford the extra expense and thus stick to one camera. Continuity lapses, jump cuts and boring long takes are very typical of Kumawood films as a result of their shooting style. Some clever directors have used cutaways in the films sometimes unrelated to the scene to cut into long takes. Except for some exaggerations, acting generally is good because performers do not struggle with the language in the dialogue delivery. Some characterisations come naturally as people are very familiar with the situations depicted. In some instances people are type-casted for roles they have become identified with over the years. Kumawood movies are mainly dialogue-driven due to the improvised scenarios worked out between performers as already discussed. Thus with little visual appeal in some films, non-Akan viewers find it a little difficult to appreciate what is happening on the screen. Some of the films are without subtitles and even where there are, just as already mentioned, lack of professional training tells on the subtitles which are replete with spelling errors and poor grammatical constructions, rendering the subtitles meaningless. Foreigners also see these films as shouting bouts since many scenes depict quarrels and arguments where people shout themselves hoarse. Trading of insults is commonplace which raises the question of suitability for minors who may pick up bad language. Some of the films have

also denigrated traditional cultural practices in attempts to promote Christian beliefs. Some producers with the support of churches have used the filmic medium as extension of the pulpit for evangelising.

There are productions made in Twi, however, that do not exhibit the shortcomings typical of Kumawood films. Thus, they negate the often-generalised assertion that Ghanaian local language films are sub-standard. In 1991, Kofi Yirenkyi, a professionally-trained filmmaker produced *Sika Sunsum* in Twi. It tells the story of Agya Ntow, a greedy landlord who introduces his young wife Rose to Jimmy Cash as a niece in need of money for trading. He gets the money from Jimmy but does not take it kindly when Jimmy and Rose get close. Out of jealousy, Ntow poisons Jimmy to death and Rose is arrested as the prime suspect. The ghost of Jimmy torments Ntow until he confesses his crime and commits suicide in the end. This film made before the coming of Kumawood met the required standard and was well received.

In recent times, Deron Albright's *The Destiny of Lesser Animals* (2011) has been making waves at international film festivals since its release.⁵ The film tells the story of Boniface Koomsin, an ex-Ghanaian police officer deported from the US a decade ago who is attempting to go back to the US and thus seeks help in acquiring a passport which gets stolen the very day he receives it from the agent. In attempt to track the thief, he solicits the help of a police officer called Oscar Darko. Their investigations take them to the criminal underworld where situations turn deadly. The film shot entirely in Akan (a mixture of Twi and Fante) has very interesting scenes with excellent cinematography, sound and editing.

Though there are subtitles, one could still grasp what situations are depicted if there were none.

The difference between these films and that of a typical Kumawood film, I argue, is in the approach and the handling of the cinematic medium by the directors and the actors. The script for *The Destiny of Lesser Animals* (2011) was originally done in English by a Ghanaian writer (resident in US) who collaborated with an American director and a Ghanaian co-producer to make the film. A professional translator was used to translate the script into Twi and they used actors who were bilingual in English and Twi. Thus, they studied the original English script and the Twi version and worked out the transpositions with the director and producers. In this way, scenes could be shot and re-taken without any problems as scenarios were not worked out during the camera roll. To the Kumawood producers, this process requires extra production time and resources which they cannot afford due to low budgets.

Another recent example is *Chronicles of Odumkrom: The Headmaster* (2015) written and directed by the veteran filmmaker Ernest Abbeyquaye.⁶ In this film about the struggle of one man to provide educational infrastructure for his community in the face of opposition from other well-meaning individuals, we are confronted with the stark realities of modern-day developmental challenges in Africa where politics become detrimental to the progress of a people instead of the opposite. Master Andoh aka Headmaster bent on rebuilding the collapsed school block in Odumkrom resorts to pawning his young daughter to servitude to a rich money lender in order to raise funds for the project. This film also does not exhibit those problematic

technical characteristics associated with Kumawood though it is in a local language. It has so far received positive reviews in the media after its premiere in Accra and appearance at international film festivals.⁷ The subtitles are on point and so are the cinematography and the acting.

I argue that these examples defeat the assertion that local language films produced in Ghana are mediocre. The point be made that it is the producers without the requisite film training who do not see the need to engage professionals in the film production and thus go through the process in their own adopted way and produce substandard films. However, being satisfied with their sales returns, these producers have not been keen on improving the technical quality of their products. Their productions are screened on television channels daily; they are uploaded to YouTube and receive views which are great to them; the video discs are sold in traffic all over the places in Ghana and African communities in Europe and America. I argue that it is the popularity of Kumawood that drove local television stations to dub Indian telenovelas in Twi that has become the current trend in Ghana.⁸ Some have argued that the growing popularity of these Twi-language foreign soaps on Ghanaian television caused the decreased patronage of locally produced movies. This assertion is so strong that calls have been made for the imposition of a ban on the telenovelas.

I do not support the argument because other factors affecting the film industry on the whole should be considered. Silverbird Cinema Cineplex operates two multi-screening theatres at the two big shopping malls in Accra. Even these screen mostly American films

as management requirements are difficult to be met by local film producers. Thus producers have to task themselves with screening tours to several venues with hired mobile equipment. In addition is direct sale of video discs for home consumption but whose patronage has also dropped drastically. Ghana recently migrated to digital television transmission and thus increased accessibility to many channels offering a variety of programmes to viewers. It is my view also that Kumawood producers began losing their audience when they resorted to producing cheap imitations of Hollywood science fiction films. The special effects were poorly executed and the stories of aliens' invasion in the form of weird-looking robots did not click with audiences.

Though I still stand by earlier arguments raised about the negative effects of some issues in Ghanaian films generally⁹, I see them as an important body of material worthy of support. These Kumawood films can best serve as cultural artefacts with the several traditional situations depicted. The films also serve as an important body of "visual literature" through the narratives. Perhaps as an alternative to publishing, these films tell our stories despite the technical challenges associated with the chosen medium. Improved craftsmanship through some kind of regular short-term professional training will help.

Kumawood is progressing despite the challenges. When they felt marginalised by film award organisers in Ghana, they instituted their own Kumawood Akoben Film Festival and Awards (KAFF) in 2011 to keep their morale up. One of the telecommunication giants in the country, MTN recently launched the Kumawood App to provide film content on mobile devices on the network.¹⁰ This will expand the

marketing of Kumawood films in addition to what is already done through screening on buses and upload to YouTube and sales of video discs in traffic and small stalls.

A possible major breakthrough for Kumawood would be to win an Oscar. Ghana was invited to submit an entry for 2018 foreign language category of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards.¹¹ It was a herculean task for a 14-member committee engaged in a selection process for a Ghanaian production in a local language to meet the stringent guidelines established for the Oscars.¹² As predicted by critics, no production met the standards and as such none was selected. Perhaps with this window of opportunity to possibly place Ghana on the cinematic map of the world, a production could be put together to meet the required technical specifications for next year. With the coming into force of The Development and Classification of Film Act (2016) which is to establish the National Film Authority and administer a National Film Fund, the time is now for the film industry to be uplifted to compete strongly on the global screens, especially with its local language films which carry with it some form of unique national identifier. The technical challenges can be dealt with through improved training and support. Creativity abounds in the country and should be nurtured for national development.

Notes

1. The film won the grand prize Etalon Yennenga at the 1989 Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), Burkina Faso.
2. See: <https://www.pulse.com.gh/entertainment/movies/kumawood-and-their-crazy-movie-titles-id4071091.html> Accessed 10/05/2017
3. One such occurrence was the seizure of a movie by state security after the



- Cinematographic Board of Control has approved its release. See: <http://vibeghana.com/2011/05/30/cinema-board-slams-govt-over-atta-mortuary-man%E2%80%99-movie-seizure/> accessed May 30, 2011.
4. See: <https://www.newsghana.com.gh/ghanaian-local-movies-use-scripts/> accessed 10/05/2017 and <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/entertainment/No-scripts-for-local-language-films-fate-or-choice-300099> accessed 10/05/2017
 5. See: <http://www.destinyofles-seranimals.com>
 6. See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt41-13796>
 7. See: <https://www.graphic.com.gh/entertainment/showbiz-news/shake-speare-brewed-in-ghanaian-pot.html> Accessed 11/05/2017
 8. See: <http://www.myjoyonline.com/entertainment/2016/October-19th/why-ghaiians-cant-get-enough-of-kumkum-bhagya-veera.php> accessed 30/07/2017
 9. See: Aveh, A, (2010), 'The rise of the video film industry and its projected

social impact on Ghanaians', in Ernest N. Emenyonu (ed), *African Literature Today*, vol. 28, Woodbridge: James Currey, pp. 122–132.

10. See: <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/entertainment/Kumawood-goes-high-tech-536782> accessed 11/05/2017
11. See: <http://www.pulse.com.gh/movies/oscars-ghana-to-submit-film-for-2018-oscars-id6627857.html> accessed 04/05/2017
12. See: <http://www.graphic.com.gh/features/features/ghana-film-s-for-the-oscar-a-difficult-venture.html> accessed 08/04/2017

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