

# CODESRIA Report

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## Pan-Africanism: Adapting African Stories/Histories from Text to Screen

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The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), in conjunction with the Guild of African Filmmakers and Producers organized, on 25 and 26 February 2013, a workshop on ‘*Pan-Africanism: Adapting African Stories/Histories from Text to Screen*’.

**Manthia Diawara**  
New York University, USA  
**Carlos Cardoso**  
CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal

apart’. Thus, the word, the name, the stereotype, has the potential to contract the scope, to reduce or distort the quality within the overall undertaking of naming; ‘in short, a word can inhibit or expand imagination. It can prove a curse or a blessing’.

Bringing together filmmakers, writers and directors, the workshop’s goal was to explore some possibilities of Pan-Africanist narratives, aesthetics, theoretical and political configurations in literature, films and videos today. The point of departure of the reflections was that there are contradictory images of Africa in Nollywood and other Anglophone and Francophone narratives that compel us to ask some questions like the following: What are the mass-mediated images of Africa today, in texts, music, film and videos? What is the role of African literature, film and video in the global art world today? Is it desirable and possible for African artists to achieve a Pan-Africanist literature, cinema and video, today, in the same way that the first generation of writers and filmmakers were able to set nation building as their main goal? What would the aesthetic language of Pan-Africanism, the art that sets as its aim the unification of Africa and its Diaspora, consist of today? Crucially, what is the role of adaptation from text to film, to video, to music and plastic arts, and vice versa, in the proliferation of such aesthetics? We could also see here an important role given to the documentary cinema and video genres, which would include archival materials on the history of key Pan-Africanist figures of the past and present.

The workshop started with a key note address delivered by the Nigerian writer and Nobel Literature Prize winner, Wole Soyinka, entitled: ‘A Name is More than the Tyranny of Taste’. Soyinka began his presentation by defining the ‘Arts’ as a ‘singular expression of the human imagination and inventiveness’, which has the capacity of provoking our most suppressed feelings. He put cinematic art at the centre of such catharsis.

From the title of the speech to this cautionary opening, one understands right away that the main topic of Soyinka’s presentation has to do with ‘names, designations, genres and qualifications’ that may, or may not, deserve to be called ‘Arts’. Words are often tied to images; they have shapes and meanings which can go beyond their intended and literal signification, to connote apprehensions in our minds. For Soyinka, there can be so much distortion in the meaning of certain ‘names’ that the conjured up stereotypical ‘images become eventually attached to words with such intimacy that they can no longer be prised

Reverting to the African oral traditions, Soyinka reminded us that naming the child constituted a creative process in Africa: ‘Naming in Africa, especially in Yorubaland, is a special gift that the ancestors as progenitors of the nation bestowed on the elders. Names have meaning and, as they would have us believe, names push their bearers to actualize their encoded meanings – *Oruko a maa ro omo* (literally meaning that the name may mold the child). So, you don’t find any Yoruba parent giving to their babies names that embed evil meanings’.

Soyinka also pointed out that there are variations in names: names that have meanings, original names, plagiarized ones and those that are un-mediated imitations, such as the infamous names that signify other names and events – the ‘N’ word, the ‘B’ word, or the ‘A’ word, as in Africa. He then went on to elaborate on the history of cinema, from the infamous ‘Birth of a Nation’, to ‘Purlie Victorious’, to the Italian Neorealism, to ‘Django Unchained’, which he praised for its mastery of the parodic style in film. He also made brilliant references to the films of his favorite African directors: Sembene, Cisse, Sissoko and Mambety Diop.

To summarize, we would like to suggest that there were two main strands in Soyinka’s paper. The first was concerned with what he called the ‘N’ word, which is his acronym for Nollywood. He admonished the filmmakers in Nigeria to be better than what Nollywood had so far produced; to rise above the negative stereotypes of Nigeria and Nigerians, where ‘Everything is oversize in the birthplace of Nollywood – oversize consumption, oversize class distinctions, oversize exhibitionism, oversize egos, oversize superstition, oversize de-humanization, oversize corruption, oversize inflation – both human and economic - oversize national real estate, oversize pugnacity, oversize garbage heaps, oversize decay, oversize media, oversize foreign investments, oversize churches and oversize mosques, oversize consumerism by an oversize elite, even oversize First Ladies with oversize vulgarity, oversize rapacity, avaricious-ness and overreachingness [sic]’.

The second theme in Soyinka’s speech addressed itself to all African filmmakers. He advised them to be courageous, for, to be an artist today in Africa is to have great courage: courage to

speak out in the face of impending danger – danger created by undemocratic leaders and religious zealots, such as Boko Haram, MUJAO and Ensardine. He challenged our filmmakers to look for art in the many African mythologies that are as enduring as the ‘Harry Potters’ of the West; to dare compete with the Spielberg and the Tarantino in their mastery of film language. If they search for the iconic images of our time, they will find them in ‘the plight of women who are being lashed publicly for showing off an inch or two of bare flesh above their ankles ... in the disfigurement of individuals whose hands have been amputated, equally on account of stealing a loaf of bread as for shaking hands with a human being of the opposite sex ... in those blood-drenched pits where women have been buried to the neck and stoned to death by a public for the crime of giving their bodies to whomsoever they please ... in images of men awaiting execution for yielding to the impulses of that biological make-up that responds only to others of the same sex and result in homosexual relationship’.

After Soyinka’s inspiring keynote address, the workshop moved to panel presentations and discussions by the participants. The workshop was organized around five thematic clusters, constituting four plenary sessions and one round table:

1. Filmic adaptation and what is adaptable in the last 50 years of African literary production;
2. The relations and differences between literary and filmic narrations;
3. Contemporaneity: The African film and literary movements
4. African literature and film in the Era of digital technologies
5. Is there such a thing as African Literature and Film?

Four presentations were made in the first group, touching on issues related to adaptation and creation, oral traditions, linkages between literature and cinema in Africa, African folklore and writing screenplays in South Africa. Discussions amongst participants pointed out that adaptation is a recurrent practice in filmmaking, especially when it comes to adapting written texts into screenplays. Nevertheless, adaptation should not be seen as an act of ‘slavish’ imitation, whereby the secondary text (film) is considered as inferior to the primary text (novel or play).

There is a debt on the director who adapts from an original work. Adaptation symbolizes a ‘creative transformation’ in the sense that there is a transfiguration of the work. There is a recreation in the act of adapting. It is in the freedom of the adaptor that the creativity lies. Some examples of adaptations include ‘Kongi’s Harvest’, ‘The Ambiguous Adventure’, ‘Things Fall Apart’, and ‘Waiting for the Vote of Wild Beasts’.

It was recalled that the creative landscapes are characterized by certain complexities due to overlapping modes of expression and the fluidity of frontiers between different modes of expression. It is from this perspective that one has to consider the relationships between oral traditions, literature and cinema, which exist side by side, influencing, confronting and interacting with each other, in a dialogically and mutually transformative ways. There is an interesting dynamics of exchange between these art forms, which is predicated on varying degrees of repetition, revision, subversion, parody, ‘betrayal’ and change, as well as a blurring, conflation or even erasure of the boundaries. One participant recalled that many artists are

shedding singular designations as novelists or filmmakers to take on plural or hyphenated labels as griot-filmmaker or writer-filmmaker. The consensus was that we needed to capture the nature of the exchange between oral tradition, literature and cinema, and most importantly to discover the continuity and back-and-forth flow between the art forms.

Building on the already existing contributions of African scholars who have generated and circulated knowledge about Africa through literature and film, and on the presentations made, participants shared the view that the adaptation of African folklore (tales, legends and myths) into films offers an inexhaustible fount of inspiration for filmmakers. The discussion on the subject of adaptation, from a historical and formalist perspective, was expanded, yet again, by additional presentations, which looked at the topic from a philosophical angle, which emphasized the notions of origin, originality, primary/secondary creativity and borrowing.

A more general and theoretical discussion of the topic then followed. The participants stressed the fact that although there is always a debt on the adaptation vis-à-vis the original work, adaptation does not prevent one from being creative, and that in such a case, we are allowed to talk of ‘creative transformation’. It is the freedom to adapt that leads to inspiration and creativity. Therefore, in adaptation, there is always a moment of creativity.

After these, there were specific presentations focusing on case studies of adaptations. A presentation on the adaptation of Uganda folktales revealed that great works of art, past and present, have drawn from people’s history and folklore, and have functioned as windows into the community’s culture and worldview. The presenter was then able to extrapolate that African films like *Yeelen*, *Keita* and *Guimba*, are among the great movies from the continent that have drawn heavily from folklore. The filmmakers have effectively articulated community issues that are at once both local and universal. Through an examination of folktales from Uganda, the presentation showed that such stories can be adapted into film to illustrate mainstream African and universal cultural values. The argument is that such moral and redemptive values are not always accessible in modern and contemporary life.

There was also a case study which focused on writing screenplays in South Africa. The main presenter explored a number of key challenges that confront scriptwriters in the cinematic and cultural landscape in the country. The presentation stressed the fact that writers have to wrestle with a wide range of contradictions that range from the ambiguous status of African Literature in the cultural and educational sectors; matters pertaining to cultural identity, from artistic and visual aesthetics to those that are embedded in the repertoires and economies of production that are symptomatic of the South African film industry. As far as the issue of identity is concerned, it was stressed that although since 1951 there have been twenty adaptations from novels, only three of them were written by Black South Africans. Given that Blacks constitute the majority of the South African population, and they own the bulk of folktales, the presentation raises important questions on the

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limits of writing and adaptation in contemporary South Africa. This presentation questioned the modes of existence of national cinema in South Africa, where the filmmakers look more to the West than to the rest of Africa and its literature and folklore.

In the second group of presentations, two papers were discussed on two icons of African art and literature: one dealing with Ousmane Sembene's heritage and the other with Wole Soyinka's filmic palimpsests. The presentation and discussion around Sembene Ousmane recognized that during his half-century career, more than a quarter of his literary and film output were devoted to interrogating the African past. Films like *Emitai*, *Ceddo* (1977) and *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) co-directed with Thierno Faty Sow, are proofs of such inclination. Before coming to cinema, Ousmane Sembene had already gained popularity throughout the world as the author of the literary masterpiece, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), a fictional reconstruction of the 1947-1948 African railroad workers' strike that paralyzed traffic for months on a line that goes from Senegal to Mali. But for Sembene, the act of writing about history means, at the same time, to make history. History is about how we imagine the past. So, whenever his camera pointed to the past, it was always with a critical eye.

The discussion on Wole Soyinka's work centred on the theory of 'Third Cinema' which considered the camera as a weapon that shed light on unseen people and their histories. The argument is that 'Third Cinema' as opposed to Hollywood and European 'auteur' cinemas, is capable of providing new stories, a new life and a new humanity to Third World people who have been stereotyped throughout the history of cinema; hence, the term 'the camera as a weapon'. Participants stressed the point that the use of the camera as a weapon must also take into consideration the context in which the production takes place, and also the way and means chosen by the artist to pass his message across. It was remembered that some of his critics accused Soyinka of writing in a mode that makes him inaccessible to some sections of the society. It was recognized that some of the works of this great writer, that take the form of film are not well known by large audiences, and that some of his films like *Culture in Transition* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (1971) and *Blues for a Prodigal* (1984) could have bridged this chasm between the creator and his audience, if they had been able to circulate widely.

The presenter concluded by stating that Soyinka engaged in a 'film palimpsest', which forces the readers to develop several tools of reading, and several levels of understanding. Thus, new generation of filmmakers were encouraged to take advantage of Soyinka's script writing skills and film making experience.

The two presentations on these great icons of African film and literature helped the participants to better understand the ties between the two art forms, and to re-examine more closely how Sembene and Soyinka approached the questions of adaptation, translation and transformation of the primary texts by the secondary ones. What can we say today about adaptation, influence and/or translation of African primary texts in the light of the film works of Sembene and Soyinka?

Coming to the fourth group, which was devoted to contemporaneity, participants analyzed the intersectionality of literary and cinematic socioscapes, and issues related to mutating literacies, cultural productions and new imaginaries of Africanness. The presenters also examined the meanings of tradition, African identity, and the unstable notions of authenticity. In trying to understand the African film and literary movements, they raised the following questions: Are writers, filmmakers and video-makers contemporaries of one another? Are they travelling fellows, in the sense that they read the same books, see the same films and listen to the same music? Are they in the same time line? Do they have the same preoccupations with African politics, history and arts?

One of the strongest views expressed during this debate is that 'divergences in the vistas, narratives and textures of writers and popular cinema practitioners, jostle for space with their converging constructions of 'old and new' modes of being'. Thus, popular African cinema, including the video film industry, embodies some shared contradictions, pathologies, struggles and visions that reflect one of the framing kilns in which they are wrought. The most important questions included the varying artistic forms that enter into play, when different artists work with the dynamics of African languages and their ever-evolving polyglot cultures to produce texts that have discursive resonances for Africans today.

It was in the same vein that another presentation argued for a visual literacy through a collage of videos, photos and films that engage people into a conversation. The thesis in this presentation was that we have moved into a new context, which requires us to produce works that could feed the emerging imaginations. Young video makers today characterize themselves through the universal language of their video installations. They express themselves through images of Sankara, Lumumba, Che, and they try to look and feel like the youth everywhere, with common dress style, music and attitudes. They are the new pan-Africanists.

One of the presentations focused on the challenges of creating new tools for visual literacy, which could help us to account for the new languages of digital and performance cultures that include the new means of social struggles and quests for imagining new subjectivities. One of the speakers asked: 'Why do we have the American artist Kanye West producing music videos with Nigerian performance artists? Why has New York and Lagos become so close to one another?' We need to develop new vocabularies to account for these digital and 'mutating' vocabularies of adaptation. In the same vein, we have Ghanaian and Nigerian artists, who use cyber culture to talk to each other and to create new imaginary communities, which are transnational and not tied to any one place. Thus, we can conclude that these new devices of literacy are more over-determined by television than by dramatic literature of celluloid film. The youth now think in algorithm, instead of a logo-centric and traditional manner.

In connection with this question, participants further discussed on the need for new ways of representing women and their role in African societies. It was underlined that African women filmmakers have a better potential of presenting an improved image of the social status of women and of demanding more equality with men. One paper argued that African women filmmakers had created works that showed women's reaction to

their social and legal positions, and their critique of pressing political violence and war in Africa, in which women are always the victims.

Interestingly, the same presenter lamented the paucity of films in sub-Saharan Africa, by men or women, on the highly taboo topic of homosexuality. Some participants called for critics to denounce the demonization of lesbian women in sub-Saharan African video movies. Such films, often made with the support of religious groups, present lesbians as aberrant, foreign, and/or diseased. Film critics should demand better representations of lesbians in sub-Saharan Africa today, particularly in the many films being produced by Nollywood in Nigeria.

Also discussed was the question of the invisibility of certain ethnic and social minorities in the visual and literary texts. It was argued that art and culture can participate in the construction of a modern African continent and its diaspora by making such groups visible in a positive light. Participants agreed, therefore, that there is need to make a cartography of the invisibility of Black and African men and women.

The second day of the conference opened with the visit of the Senegalese Minister of Culture, Mr Abdul Aziz, who made a brief presentation on the cultural policy of his country and its support for film and the other arts. The minister pointed out that Africa has a lot of stories to tell the world and that this should be done by Africans themselves. According to him:

We have a continent full of untold of stories and it is our turn to speak, to make our films, to create our arts. We should tell stories that enable us to mobilize our youth for the future. Nobody should tell our stories for us. The world should give us the opportunity to make our own mistakes. In making and adapting those histories, we should talk first about quantity, and then about quality. In order to advance in areas like filmmaking, we need to define right policies, in such fields as education. We need to put our resources together, because one country alone cannot do it. Let's talk the same language first, and then coordinate our policies. It's only by doing this that we can become strong. Our governments should wake up. We have the duty to make a reality of the dreams of our youth. Culture is important! You cannot develop economy without culture.

The fifth group of the workshop was devoted to African Literature and Film in the Era of Digital Technologies. Here, participants tried to respond to questions about the relationships between African Literature and Film and the New Technologies. What can we learn from Nollywood and the other video movements in Africa today? Can the video makers learn from African literature and film? Central in the debate were questions about the economic gains and the aesthetic losses in digital cinema.

There was a presentation on the history of TV and video production in South Africa. Given the Apartheid history of that country, it was pointed out that most of the television programmes were oriented towards Western productions, TV shows and films. At the end of Apartheid, the struggle changed to how to decolonize the television programmes. Independent video producers still have serious difficulties in putting their films in the public broadcasting programmes. One thing that came out of the digital revolution was that it broke the

television's monopoly on the representation of the images of South Africa. As the distribution of bootleg copies of DVDs grew, more critiques of the government developed. Concurrently, it was also interesting to notice the growth of Christian educational documentaries. The new struggles now concerned the need for independent film and video makers to put their works on TV.

Another key concern of the presenter had to do with the poor quality of training in the era of digital revolution. While exciting in their potential for democratizing access to audio-visual expression and enhancing possibilities in the editing room, the digital technologies have adversely impacted on the depth of expression in terms of taking time to edit the films. Anybody who has a video camera can become a filmmaker now. People just shoot and quickly put the films together, without giving any serious thought to techniques of storytelling, ethics and intellectual editing.

The presentation on the Ghanaian videos was also historical, in terms of the evolution of that country from film to digital videos. It was argued that movies coming from Ghana have come a long way and gained some level of international recognition, especially with its English language titles, which have won international awards. However, in the past five to ten years, there has been a steady growth of local productions in Twi and other local languages. Christened 'Kumawood', because of the fact that the videos are mostly produced in Kumasi, these movies have grown in popularity especially with the rural people where literacy in English is very low. In making the films a source of knowledge about people's life, these movies are largely social dramas told in simple plots to make the average person understand and appreciate them.

Nevertheless, the digital revolution has also created a 'quantity/quality' divide here, too. Without government support for film production, filmmakers have had to fend for themselves as producers and distributors of their own films. The market pressure also forces them to quickly produce bad quality films, with bad subtitles. There is also a realization that it is popular stars that carry the films, and not good stories. All of these elements of the digital reality have contributed to lowering the quality of Ghanaian movies. It was pointed out in the discussion that the problem was not only that the videos were shot in a local African language. The real issue has to do with poor quality of production, which is an imperative of the digital, instantaneous demand by the consumer society. As one of the participants in the audience put it, the digital technology has its own exigencies and requirements, which influence the content and the form of the videos. In another quality/quantity discussion, this time with regard to distribution, it was said that one reason the local language 'Kumawood' films were not able to reach an international audience was that the producers were happy with only Twi speaking audiences in Ghana, which constituted 60 per cent of the population.

The last two sessions were devoted to the issue of whether there is such a thing as Pan-African Literature and Film today. The first speaker at this round table stated that Pan-Africanism can come through many forms, and not just through militancy.

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Pan-Africanism can also come, regardless of color. This is where African film and video make a strong impact, by strengthening the ties between Africa and the Diaspora. African films have given a new life to African literature. The films thus meet the test of pan-Africanism by providing an access to African cultures, wherever there are shown. It is a known fact that African films are taught more in the curriculum in America than they are in African countries. We see therefore the world from the perspectives of the films, which is an interesting way of shifting the centre, and creating bonds with the Diaspora and the rest of the world.

There was a suggestion that discussions around the issues of sexuality should be at the centre of today's Pan-Africanism. This is to say, true Pan-Africanists should be able to talk about women loving women and men loving men as something positive of African endeavour towards freedom, democracy and modernity.

Artists are beginning to define Africa and Africanness in new and different ways. There are collaborative works between Ghana and Nigeria. We are coming to grips with new political economies which determine the ways in which Africans define themselves, in terms of being related or separate nations. As we become our own writers, film and video makers, we talk about problems that are more pressing to us: Trans-Saharan slavery, homosexuality and other gender issues.

Just like the founding fathers, young Africans are also critical of the language barriers (Anglophone, Lusophone and

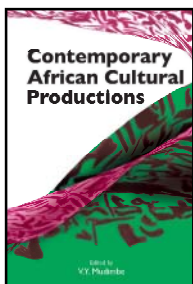
Francophone) in the digital era. It was strongly recommended that we use the new digital tools to get to know one another better. We need to read across language and technological barriers. We are at crossroads that bring together writing, filmmaking, curating art, photo and digital technologies. We have to take seriously such neologisms as: Afropolitans, transAfricans, postnegritudists and Afrofuturists, because they are the new languages that organize the youth in Africa and its Diaspora. We need to develop digital and cultural tools to teach the youth in communities that are bigger than the nation state, and even bigger than Africa.

A speaker pointed out that Pan-Africanism is firstly a political project, which came out of a sense of exclusion, an experience of being excluded, while the rest of the world was getting modernized and getting ahead. Pan-Africanism can also be defined as a generosity of spirit, with larger plans in mind. Imagination and openness is a large part of Pan-Africanism. It is about being able to claim more space, and being part of a larger world, with ideas migrating from place to place; the ones influencing the others, connecting them with the ties that bind. In this sense, we still need Pan-Africanism and Black trans-nationalism. We have no choice.

In conclusion, it was agreed that the CODESRIA/FESPACO workshop was very successful. Wole Soyinka's keynote address was energizing and cited throughout the two-day meeting. Many of the participants and colleagues pleaded with CODESRIA to publish the proceedings, which could be used as a textbook in many African universities. Some of the presentations could also serve as useful materials in the development of film and video curriculums where none presently exists.

## Contemporary African Cultural Productions

Edited by V.Y. Mudimbe



All over Africa, an explosion in cultural productions of various genres is in evidence. Whether in relation to music, song and dance, drama, poetry, film, documentaries, photography, cartoons, fine arts, novels and short stories, essays, and (auto)biography; the continent is experiencing a robust outpouring of creative power that is as remarkable for its originality as its all-round diversity.

Beginning from the late 1970s and early 1980s, the African continent has experienced the longest and deepest economic crises than at any other time since the period after the Second World War. Interestingly however, while practically every indicator of economic development was declining in nominal and/ or real terms for most aspects of the continent, cultural productions were on the increase. Out of adversity, the creative genius of the African produced cultural forms that at once spoke to crises and sought to transcend them.

The current climate of cultural pluralism that has been produced in no small part by globalization has not been accompanied by an adequate pluralism of ideas on what culture is, and/or should be; nor informed by an equal claim to the production of the cultural – packaged or not. Globalization has seen to movement and mixture, contact and linkage, interaction and exchange where cultural flows of capital, people, commodities, images and ideologies have meant that the globe has become a space, with new asymmetries, for an increasing intertwinement of the lives of people and, consequently, of a greater blurring of normative definitions as well as a place for re-definition, imagined and real.

As this book – Contemporary African Cultural Productions – has done, researching into African culture and cultural productions that derive from it allows us, among other things, to enquire into definitions, explore historical dimensions, and interrogate the political dimensions to presentation and representation. The book therefore offers us an intervention that goes beyond the normative literary and cultural studies' main foci of race, difference and identity; notions which, while important in themselves might, without the necessary historicizing and interrogating, result in a discourse that rather re-inscribes the very patterns that necessitate writing against.