

Colonisation of culture: African cinema's dilemma in resonance with ours.

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Mandella's victory at the recently-held South African elections represents for us one of the most powerful rhetorics of the breakdown of a cruel apartheid system. But there is yet another side to the rhetoric that is at the moment subsumed by the forefronting of this black-white struggle. This relates to a set of black-black dynamics working at a pan-African level but with its genesis, nonetheless, in white Anglo-Saxon domination; and encapsulated in continuing colonialist attitudes. The difference lies in the following: that whereas in the colonial times this domination was achieved through a systematic subversion of the historical ties that the colonised maintained with their past; in the prevailing post-colonial times this (domination) is reflected in a certain Western attitude towards non-Western people. The symptoms are the same for both occasions --- a beleaguered sense of self-pride among its people, that begins to find expression in the various elements of his every-day experience, culture being one of these. The intention here is to highlight one specific aspect of Africa's culture, viz., Africa's cinema (and its enlarged version of black cinema that includes the efforts of black American film makers). As matters stand today, it has become imperative to understand whether the institutional support structure for African cinema is ideologically and pragmatically supportive or, in fact, restrictive towards its

growth. And whether African cinema's current struggle against the tide of colonisation of cultures worldwide has lessons for us in India

African cinema has a noteworthy arena for exhibiting its creativity (and ideology) once every two years at the Oagadougou Film Festival held under the auspices of the FESPACO (Pan-African Film Festival of Oagadougou). Oagadougou is located in Burkina Faso which is one of the smallest and poorest of countries in the world; nevertheless (or perhaps on account of such distinction), Burkina Faso's Oagadougou begins to assume a certain level of interest for the outsider. For us it is important to understand that the fact of its colonial past makes Burkina Faso and such other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America quite vulnerable to external pressures and manipulations. Manthia Diawaras, who has recently edited a collection on black U.S. cinema, outlines in an article "New York and Oagadougou; The Homes of African Cinema" (Sight and Sound, November '93) the grim fact that, African cinema's material crisis today may be located at the level of its lacking an effective logistics support that is essential towards underwriting activities related to the promotion, production and distribution of films. However, the real crisis seems not merely infrastructural but at a level of the cultural, which is embodied in "the lack of a public for African cinema in Africa" due largely on account of the "colonisation of African screens by American and Kung Fu movies". Part of this crisis was, therefore, addressed by the FEPACI (Pan-African Federation of Film-makers) last year in their attempt to "reassess their leadership" at the 13th FESPACO. This was followed up by suggestions that combined the concept of quotas and tax

incentives (at the distribution level) with a move towards decentralization. In effect, this would involve a partitioning of the Continent into six subregions, and it goes to the credit of the FEPACI to simultaneously take note of the consequences of this suggested partitioning. One of the anticipated consequences could be a series of projected fallouts occurring when an economic activity such as film-distribution is based within a framework that depends on certain operatives, and which in their own turn, do not necessarily rely on axioms of national borders or on minimum threshold values of coterminosity. Which means that the decentralization scheme suggested by the FEPACI might not go a long way in providing certain necessary threshold values, e.g., in terms of ticket revenues or audience, that are eventually imperative towards translating African films into commercially viable propositions within a pan-African market. For this, a framework of extended markets with transnational boundaries might have to be retained. The partitioning, on the other hand, could work towards fulfilling other objectives. Chief among these being the nurturing of those situations where it is a certainty of experience that a given essential degree of geo-political coterminosity is functionally tied up with preempting potential mess-ups in decision-making, which are anyway known to accrue from political expediencies working within a given country. By inference, this would amount to a situation that involve a non-collaborative setup. Or alternately, situations involving real bi-lateral tie-ups, e.g., with a financial collaborator; obviously under such circumstances, the given African state would be constrained to respect the diktats of its (usually Western) financial sources. Incidentally, almost all of African film-

production is funded by out-of-continent sources, of which ten percent is represented by Anglophone sources of financing (e.g in countries such as Ghana or Nigeria) and ninety percent by Francophone sources (in countries such as Burkino Faso, Chad, Tunisia, Senegal, Cameroon, Guinea - Bissau). This, of course, is not true of India where most films are either state, corporate or individually funded. Also, India as a single country has the distinct advantage of working as a composite whole where African film makers have to constantly strive towards some kind of a confederacy. But what is, indeed, comparable between Africa and India is Africa's overall and our increasing dependence on Western development funding agencies (the IMF, the World Bank) which force our people to begin to "conform to the ethics of western market-systems at the expense of local social and cultural traditions." (Diawara, S & S, Feb'93). African film-maker Djibril Diop Mambety's 'Hyenas' is an instance of a film that parodies this particular situation that more or less stems from Bretton Woods' overlordship and which has now assumed cult proportions in much of sub-Saharan Africa. India on the other hand, is yet to give expression to this concern through a film that might have served as an effective allegory of neo-colonial domination -- subtle, intangible and insidious in its characterisation. Perhaps something akin in form if not in content to M. S. Sathyu's seventies' creation -- 'Garam Hawa' that served for its times, as a veritable bridgehead for a certain brand of resurgent cinema; through its protestation against the alienation and anomie experienced by rural India, on account of its rapid urbanisation since the sixties onwards.

So, in the absence of an internal market here is presented a situation of a product being made in Africa for the almost exclusive consumption of a Western audience as is equally true of yet another product of Africa -- its literature. And since these products are culture-related, the problem takes on overtones of cultural domination at one level, local alienation at another (the two decidedly working at some causal level). Precisely because of the dangers of misinterpretation of African-reality situations inherent in the act of exclusive Western viewing, that a real crisis seemed at hand for the FEPACI during their deliberations in Feb'93; and suddenly today, FESPACO realises more than ever before that it has got marginalised on the international film-festival scene, with the choicest of African films being premiered not at Oagadougou but at London, Venice, Cannes and Berlin; or even at its sister-festivals such as the Le Festival des Trois Continents a Nantes, le Festival d' Amiens, the Milan Festival of African Cinema, and the Vues d' Afrique in Montreal -- festivals once considered healthy but not so any more for African cinema's growth as an industry within Africa. To some it may seem that films are films wherever they are premiered; but if one knows anything about the politics of premiering, then one also knows that premiers are as value-neutral to cinema as science or technology are to the development curve of a country. Also, Manthia maintains that western film festivals showcasing African films tend to function as prestige workplaces for the organisers of these festivals, rather than as any effective channels of market for African films; with the result that once the screenings are over the film makers find their "films disappear and promises withdrawn". A direct offshoot of this turn of events is the rather

sad fact that FEPACI members are today compelled to use up much of their energy and resources trying to network with their Western counterparts, if only for economic reasons. There is also Africa's post-modern cinema led by Idrissa Ouedraogo, which sometimes appears subversive to the cause of African cinema's identity since the Ouedraogo school believes in making films that have "beautiful images, perfect frames and flawless editing" because this appeals to European sensibilities, and it is Europe where African films sell. One cannot deny Ouedraogo his grasp over the logic of the marketplace. But what does get subsumed under the weight of such imperatives is Diawara's assertion that "FESPACO is the only film festival devoted to pan-African cinema, a festival that takes seriously the task of nurturing, publicising and celebrating African films." It is hardly likely, in my opinion, that such nurturing will ever take place on Western soil where the mental machinery required as a subjective support to the film industry is keyed-in to appreciate films with higher production values, something that for obvious reasons cannot be made available to most Third World cinema (African films being no exception here). And yet, under the given circumstances, the subversion of an existing African initiative could lead to inevitable fallouts in terms of potential and real economic setbacks as well as in terms of more distant but accompanying psychological pressures for its people.

All in all, Diawara bemoans on behalf of the FEPACI, a certain situation attending African cinema whose films are sold and viewed mostly in exile, and which compounds in its turn a process, that has the effect of contributing in large measures to

two specific aspects: (a) these films being ghettoised to serve Eurocentric or Western notions of African multiculturalism much in the manner in which the West would wish to perceive it, rather than in the way Africa's own cultures really are. In a different context related to the question of the extent of black participation and representation on British television --- a situation that could serve as an allegory for ours, so much of this multiculturalism gets reduced to no more than a euphemism for ghetto programming. As a point in comparison, we in India cannot but help notice the way much of our cultural artefact including films is showcased and interpreted abroad as diachronically frozen, fossilized elements of our culture where it actually stems from a vibrant tradition and yet hardly shows up that way; and, (b) this exclusive Western viewing also exacerbating the process of such cinema being "relegated to art houses" in their parent countries. For us, two broad interpretations from the above situations emerge: one, that African cinema and similar culture-products from elsewhere including the ones from India remain at the receiving end of having to sacrifice their own specificities in order to cater to a "WASP-dominated assimilationist creed" which attempts to impose the hegemony of its cultural paradigms on ours. And two, that Western cinema itself takes its cue from here to expose a caricatural vision of the non-West. Spielberg's interpretation of our religious icon Kali in his film 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom' exposes a rather callous attitude towards symbols construed sacred by its people. African cinema's dilemma could well provide us with a framework for addressing our own dilemmas given the contemporary environment of melting communications boundaries, where we may want to

retain options of projecting our own concepts of our pluralism without meaning to appear either hardnosed or defeated in a post-colonial world order.

References:

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