

Dèdè n de ku ikú n de Dèdè¹: Fe/male Sexuality and Dominance in Nigerian Video Films (Nollywood)

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Abstract

Representations of fe/male sexuality in African settings continue to support colonial and neo-colonial readings of African female sexuality (in particular), as typically erotic, excessive, primitive (unselfconscious or untamed). Female characters from Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* to Wole Soyinka's *Simi* are generally cast in the mould of the voluptuous female, sensuous and sinful, an image which, with a few notable exceptions, is sustained from print through cinema reel to the now ubiquitous Nigerian Video/Digital Film. What this essay proposes is a reading of female sexuality as presented on Nigerian Video, but from the perspective of female agency, and a related quest for equality and even supremacy within apposite societal structures. The upsurge in popular cultural productions in the form of Video and CD is directly proportional to a rising and insatiable appetite for indigenous "movie" representations of contemporary socio-cultural transactions and perspectives. Explorations in fe/male sexuality and the corresponding negotiations of domestic, social and political power positions have thus become a regular fare. This often involves a female-male tango (hence fe/male) for which I have employed the indigenous Nigerian phrase "Dèdè n de ku ikú n de Dèdè", which will be explained in the essay, as metaphor.

Introduction

The upsurge in popular cultural productions in the specific form of Video

¹ This is a Yoruba saying from folklore depicting deadly combat between two forces equally matched in cunning: "Dede stalks death, Death stalks Dede".

Films and VCD in Nigeria² is proportional to a rising and insatiable appetite for indigenous movie representations of contemporary socio-cultural transactions in general and sex-gender transactions in particular. Within this symbiosis, explorations in fe/male sexuality and the corresponding negotiations of domestic, social and political power positions have become a regular fare in the industry. This is in contradistinction to the crust of silence in which the issue of sex is generally enveloped in Africa. While women's literature in particular has attempted to crack this crust on the continent, Nollywood, the Nigerian peculiar film industry, has shattered it to reverberating echoes while attempting to balance the gender equation in the expression of sexuality and power. More recently, such filmic explorations have entered the rarefied field of alternative sexuality, which is often regarded as alien to the African continent, although this is not a focus in this paper.

With Nollywood, the representation of sex and the expression of sexuality in general and female agency in particular attain a degree of orchestration never before witnessed in Nigerian cultural productions. I would propose that the representations serve a growing interest in gender drama, and not so much for sex-porn as is sometimes suggested (Tcheuyap 2005, 144; Mayah 2006). The extreme popularity of gender drama, i.e. the dramatic representation of sex-gender conflicts at various levels, can only be explained by the fact that gender-based conflicts account for a considerable amount of real life experience from childhood to adulthood. Viewers perhaps hope to glean some message for their own chequered encounters from these dramatic conflicts and their resolutions as relayed on the video screen. The popularity also focuses the growing activism for the emancipation of women and the accommodation of greater female agency and visibility in private and public domains. Films like *Women in Power* (2005) and *Women's Cot* (2005) address the question of gender and power both in terms of relative access to power and relative predilection in the

² The Nigerian (Nollywood) Video Film is defined primarily by its technical quality. Like Hollywood films it is a commercial film production, but because of the low budget available to producers, the "film" is produced in video form and sold on VHS cassette and, more recently, on VCD/DVD. Though marketed for home viewing (and hence also dubbed "home video film") it is as noted by Haynes (1997, 9) also sometimes "exhibited publicly with video projectors or television monitors."

event of acquisition of power. The sheer number of films that relate sex-gender to power is evidence of growing consciousness of their close construction within society.

Nollywood is essentially a message medium, almost wholly devoted to passing on a message, with few ambivalences in the ideological orientation or moral inclination of the productions. The “moral” is frequently rendered explicit through the dramatic/filmic process of *exposition*. Any ambivalent rendition may be evidence of conflict in the orientation of members of the production crew, especially script writer, screen-writer, producer and director (and these roles are sometimes combined in individuals in Nollywood, thus sometimes generating an internal conflict of passions and roles.) In general, sex-gender drama activates gendered empathy from Nigerian film audiences. In a different context Onookome observes aptly that the Nigerian “home video films” reflect “the flux of identities and contestatory moralities” (Onookome 2003, 68). Audiences participate actively albeit vicariously in the process of contestation. The phenomenon generates controversy; the market expands.

What this essay proposes is a reading of representations of African fe/male sexuality in contemporary Nigerian popular cultural productions from the perspective of female agency, including sexual agency, and a related quest for supremacy/control within apposite societal institutions and structures. I wish to show, from the evidence of some of the films, a deliberate and growing tendency to orchestrate female sexuality in particular as a site for power negotiations, to correlate sexual agency with power or dominance, and correspondingly to locate sex and sexuality within the domain of gendered contest. Power imagery and negotiation is deployed as much in action sequence in visual form as it is depicted through verbal language in the films. Furthermore in this survey, I wish to demonstrate a relative intensity in the deployment of female sexual agency in the quest for dominance in contemporary settings as compared with traditional settings in the films.

Discursive frames: sex, sexuality and African polity

The discussion of sex, sexuality and polity within the African context is

frequently dogged by cultural attitudes and silence, and also by critical attitudes predicated on the continent's peculiar history. For decades the socio-political concern, issues of racism, colonialism, war, hunger, dictatorship, genocide and the bestiality of power have for good reason been advanced as the main if not the only legitimate concern of African literature and literary criticism, "the burden of African letters, its rallying clarion, its organising principle" (Osundare 1990); hence the question "what has sex or sexuality got to do with 'it'" assumes a greater complexity within the context of Africa. Deviation from the truly big thematic concerns conjures images of irrelevance and uncomfortable analogies, phrased famously by Chinua Achebe in terms of "the absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames." (Achebe 1969, 8.)

Still the association between sex and larger issues of society is important. The framework for the discursive link between sex and politics is well-captured by Jane Millett's (1969) intriguing phrasing, that "coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum." The space around sex is often physical but also largely cultural and political, with male (hetero)sexuality privileged and female sexuality (be it auto-, hetero-, homo- or otherwise) disempowered. This asymmetry constitutes a constant source of conflict especially in modern society. This sexual trajectory has been related in concrete illustrative ways to the African situation (more recently in the collections Arnfred 2004; Veit-Wild & Naguschewski 2005). In a recent lecture Deborah Posel observed that no meaningful discussion of contemporary South African polity is possible, and no meaningful solution to the crisis of the polity feasible, without a thorough examination of the politics around sex, sexuality and sexual agency (Posel 2006).³ The Nigerian feminist scholar Amina Mama had also observed with specific reference to Africa that: "for less than democratic societies women have provided a foil for tyranny. Mobutu is well known for his corruption, brutality and sexual profligacy" (Mama 2001). The list of men of power whose rule has incorporated a strong expression of phallo-sexuality is fairly long. The aphorism or belief that men and women of power also have a huge sexual appetite and crave dominance for dessert suggests that theorizing the

³ Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1979) remains the most authoritative framework for the examination of sexuality in terms of desire, awareness and agency.

manner in which sexuality is constructed in the African society is a way of attempting to understand the organization and moving principles of that society.

Sex and power conundrum on video

Representations of the sex/power conundrum in Nollywood mimic the undulations and tensions between the awareness of need and the actualization of need. Gender is framed as the space between, identified as physical or social barrier to the actualization of need, hence also as site of contest and basis of mediation and negotiation. Contestation and negotiation occur across varying levels of need and perception of need. We see, for example, the negotiation of sexual agency depicted in a film like *What Women Want* (2003), of interpersonal and politico-economic influence in *Agogo Eewo* (2002), political agency in *Women in Power* (2005), and the negotiation of "legitimate" power either in the form of crown succession rights in *Return of the Princess* (2005) or inheritance rights in *Women's Cot* (2005). In all related instances, negotiation is set against the backdrop of gender conflict, gender contest and the quest for dominance, or at least for an egalitarian interactivity in interpersonal and social spheres.

I have employed the indigenous Nigerian (Yoruba) phrase, *Dèdè n de' ku Ikú n de Dèdè*, as metaphor to signify the nature and intensity of power play framed in the Nigerian Video Film sex-gender series. The phrase comes from Yoruba lore and illustrates the protracted game of stealth between Iku (Death) and Dèdè (a human character engaged in a duel with Death). It is a game that requires eternal vigilance, intelligence and counter-intelligence. Mutually wise to each others' antics, Dèdè stalks Death and Death stalks Dèdè. The sex-power tangle is depicted through a complex range of manoeuvres in Nollywood. What is played out in the films goes to the basic concept of power and relative access to power, which dictates what strategies of control may be deployed in different contexts.

French's and Raven's research on the different sources and realizations of power in interpersonal and social relations is of interest here. The authors proposed five sources and types of power, namely reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, expert power and referent power (French and

Raven, 1959). This typology was applied to gender by Paula Johnson (1976) and subsequently by several gender scholars⁴. According to Carli, of the five sources of power proposed by French and Raven, it is generally agreed by subsequent researchers that *referent* power is the source most readily accessible to women, even if they also would make use of *coercive* and *legitimate* power should the opportunity arise. Referent power relies more on attractiveness, likeability, activation of empathy, creation of conducive environment and other indirect strategies of influence and control. Theoretically it works well in romantic relationships, as Carli argues referring to Falbo's and Peplau's (1980) analysis of power strategies in intimate relationships (see Carli 1999, 86), and is often deployed by women and sometimes men, or whoever the weaker party is in relationships of power and control. From her review of the various researches, Carli concludes that "women possess higher levels of referent power than men do" and that "given the gender differences in power, women would be expected to use less direct and assertive influence strategies than men and to rely more often on interpersonal warmth and agreeableness to exert influence;" though with the usual caveat that these predictions would not always apply, particularly "under conditions where women have higher levels of expert and legitimate power relative to men" (Carli 1999, 91).

In many examples in Nollywood, sexuality is deployed as an indirect strategy of influence though not always as evidence of weakness. Indeed sexuality is also frequently deployed consciously as an instrument of coercion and control, or at the very least combined in both referent and coercive capacity. The degree of subtlety decreases from traditional to contemporary settings, hence a movement from referent to coercive power in these settings. For example in traditional settings such as in *Agogo Eewo* (2002) we find a predominant use of referent power and other indirect strategies of influence, while in more contemporary settings we find a deployment of sex and sexuality within more coercive contexts. One of the most dramatic, and deadly, examples of such deployment occurs in the film *Women's Cot* (2005).

⁴ See Carli 1999 for an elaboration of the subsequent application of the typology.

From sex play to power ploy in a traditional setting: female referent power in *Agogo Eewo*

Agogo Eewo (2002) reveals a range of African female identities within a traditional and quasi traditional setting. The representation of these identities is not necessarily a concern of the film-makers. The film focuses more on the theme of corruption and leadership in the modern African state and on evolving a corrective principle modelled on the check and balance mechanisms within the cultural and political institutions of traditional society. However, the gendered identities of the characters are also mapped on to the frames of the video with remarkable consistency and clarity. At least four women characters are seen deploying sexuality or sex in a conscious or unconscious negotiation of power relations, as referent power or influence strategy vis a vis males in interpersonal relationships or in positions of authority.

The efficacy and generative or multiplying capacity of indirect female influence or authority is perhaps most noticeable in the transmission through Tinuola (Bukky Wright), mother to Arapa (Khabirat Kafidipe) who is fiancée to Arese (Kunle Afolayan) a prince of Jogbo and contestant to the crown. Deploying legitimate authority privately as mother, Tinuola, in a short interior scene, sternly instructs her daughter Arapa not to fill her young head with thoughts of becoming a princess in view of the dangers involved in power tussle, and the need to strive first for personal attainment through the new formal system of education of the colonialists. Tinuola's tone is harsh, her demeanour uncompromising, her posture and language commanding in its use of imperatives and invectives ("foolish," "immature," "naïve," etc). However, when her daughter, Arapa transmits the same message to her fiancé, Arese, the fired up claimant to the throne, her own demeanour is different and offers an interesting contrast in the deployment of strategies of influence. This scene takes place in the woods where the couple have a secret rendezvous. In the process, Arapa appropriates her mother's caution-episteme(s) ("one does not pursue his father's assailants with bare hands," etc), but supplements this with feminine subtleties. Her tone is soft, demeanour and language are appealing. Arese walks across a brook and sits on a mound. Arapa walks across, sits beside him, smuggling close. Silent stress is transmitted to the audience as they await the outcome of this negotiation of influence and

control. Without a further word, she obtains Arese's concurrence, signalled only by his drawing her close. In the next cut, Arese is seen with the kingmakers already withdrawing his bid for the throne, at least for now.

Arapa is only a future queen and future influence on the throne. While she deploys feminine subtleties rather than sex play, the current *olori* or queen, Lape (Deolu Faleye), additionally deploys sex play as power ploy. Lape appears twice in public but four times in the palace, twice at the dining table, once in the bedroom and once in the king's reception room. In one of the dining place scenes she offers carrots to the king and asks him why they are called *atoka* ("pointer") in the indigenous Yoruba language.⁵ The carrot points directly into the throat, the king demonstrates. The shape of the carrot is suggestive of a phallus or dildo, and the "pointing" suggestive of phallic entry; the offer of carrots is also suggestive of a "carrot and stick" approach, though without any "stick" so far. The next time we return to the dining room the suggestion of sex is even more dramatic. This time as the king bellyaches over some matter of state, Lape suddenly gives him a banana and asks him to "take it" and then to "peel it." Taken by surprise and bemused, the king complies and then proceeds logically to direct the banana to his own mouth, but Lape stops him with a commanding: "put it in my mouth." He does. She takes a bite and then as he directs the remainder to his mouth she again holds him with another commanding "all of it," whereupon he sticks the rest of the banana into her mouth. After munching the mouthful, Lape concludes this suspenseful sex-play sequence with a tantalizing "I'm all yours." The king laughs. Lape's sex play is an influence strategy, first to relieve tension and then to throw in some request on issues of state. Whether described negatively as "feminine wiles" or affirmatively as female tactical negotiation, the filmic objective is to depict feminine control through sexual agency.

The third woman, Iyaloja (Abiola Atanda), is impatient with the agency of sex-play. She is a female chief and head of the market and she sits on the King's Council on equal terms with the other Chiefs. But she also seeks access to the ultimate site of power, the king's bedroom, using her

⁵ The film is in Yoruba but subtitled in English. The complex language situation in Nigerian films has been subject of sustained discussion over the decades (see for example, Oloruntoba-Oju 1990 and 1998).

unrestrained access to the palace and to Lape, the queen, with whom she is sometimes in league. When Lape complains that the King seems impervious to her sexual play, Iyaloja pretends to give up but secretly recruits the cloths seller, Alake (Awosika Ife Abosede), who also has some access to the palace. Iyaloja reasons that the younger succulent woman would wield a wider range of sexual power on the king. The scene in which Alake tries to seduce the king is interesting. Since the traditional Yoruba female vestment – *buba* (top dress) and *iro* (wrapper) – reveals little in concrete sexual terms, Alake is disadvantaged *ab initio* as to how to activate the king's sexual fancy in the very short time she has to display her wares (no pun intended) before him. Still she manages to manoeuvre herself within touching distance of the king and in one subtle movement as she bends down to pick up a cloth, her *iro* drops off. The camera's at hip-shot shows a translucent underwear caught briefly in the parting of her buttocks; simultaneously, a bewildered gaze and gaping mouth of the king. Although the king pulls himself together and orders the woman away, the deployment of sexuality in the game of power has been fully depicted in the film. Through action sequence and camera cuts, the video shows female influence permeating every level of the power structure, from non-descript private spaces to the public spheres and the seat of political power.

Transactional sex, egalitarian love and interpersonal power relations:

Camouflage; Break Up

Actual sex is frequently framed as medial agent or tool of negotiation and as tool of access to wealth and power in Nollywood. The expression: "You have to use what you have to get what you want," or its variant, occurs in so many Nollywood films⁶ that the feeling of orchestration or patterning is inescapable. In this construction the films follow transactional sex archetypes already prefigured in early Nigerian literature, with Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961) being perhaps the most prominent. The focus by early Nigerian feminist criticism on the transactional component of sexual negotiation had tended to deprive the criticism of a view of power from the perspective of sexual agency. *Jagua Nana*, archetypal seductress in

⁶ A few examples: Tatyana (Ibinabo Fibresima) in *Camouflage* (1999), Mrs Oje in *Night Out* (2001); Iyaloja in *Agogo Eewo* (2002) Confidence (Mabel Effanga) in *One Day in Heaven* (2003).

Nigerian fiction, drew a lot of feminist anger over her portrayal as a mere city prostitute (Ogundipe-Leslie 1987, 6) or representative of “damaging female stereotypes” (Tobriese 1988, 1) and generally as a moral foil in patriarchal literary hands. While this reading is legitimate, it is equally legitimate to analyse Jagua Nana’s positioning within power agency, most of her men being very much pawns in her hands. This vivacious female figure is even sufficiently self-assured to sometimes play God: “God mus [sic!] surely help you [...] As long as I love you, Freddie” (Ekwensi 1961, 7), she says, thus declaring herself the power behind Freddie’s success or accomplishment, next only to God or, more accurately, side by side, in partnership with God.

Camouflage (1999) is a typical example of the wide range of transactional sex films in Nollywood, in the same league as films like *Campus Girls* (2003), *Aristos* (2003), *High Street Girls*, *Lagos Babes*, *Outkast* (2002), and many others. The lead female character, Tatyana (Ibinabo Fibresima), an undergraduate, makes no bones about the objective to make money off men as a means of escaping poverty, or about her awareness of the potential of sexuality as a means of access. “The time to grab a guy is when he is in love.” The film is set mainly in a university campus where Tatyana sits at the head of an escort cartel. At the beginning of the film she and the other girls prepare for what Tatyana says is the “last trip” or “last party” (incidentally the title of another transactional sex film with a similar story).

What is interesting is not so much the transaction component as the power that she and the other girls exhibit. In a web article, “Cheerleaders for Reproduction,” Amelia Davis observes the behaviour and attitudes of dancers in a G-String club and notes that “if a woman is diligent she can make \$80 an hour. And this of course is why the women dance.” (Davis, undated) But from this primary motivation they soon develop a sense of power. Davis acknowledges that “their power is undeniable and strong,” which accords with one of the dancing women’s conclusion that “women are more powerful than men.” Davis herself notes that: “Though money is the prime motivation for choosing to work in the industry, it is not the only lure. [...] I found in the sweat and sway of dancers' steps, if not feminist power, an unapologetic display of the power of the feminine.” (Davis, undated)

Similar awareness of power reflects in the language of leading female

characters in transactional sex films in Nollywood. Tatyana, ironically skinny and often skimpily dressed, boasts of extraordinary ability. The language is ostentatiously prefixed with the subjective “I” or “We,” along with the predicative “can,” “will” or “shall.” Usually accompanied by a waving, dismissive, the attitude of power is unmistakable in the language (“I’ll fix him.” “We make it happen.” “We can fix things, just anything, on this campus,” etc.) Tatyana’s young male friend is only, according to her, “a camouflage,” the statement that provides the film with its title.

A different expression of the sex-power tangle in romantic relationships is depicted with much drama and suspense in *Break Up* (2003). The relationship in this film is strictly egalitarian and not transactional. The couple are both young executives and equally matched socially, but egalitarianism is precisely the source of gender and power conflict in the film. The tango is between Julie (Genevieve Nnaji) and her fiancé Austin (Ramsey Noah). Julie’s mother (Emelia Azu) had cautioned that she is “too direct and too outspoken,” which attributes may cause her matrimonial troubles; she “should be submissive to her future husband,” to which Julie retorts that “This is not the 70s.” The stage for conflict is set and the suspense is reinforced when Julie is with her female friends and they review these conflicting positions. “The first rule in a relationship,” they decide, is “break up with a guy before he breaks up with you.” The battle line is drawn across camera cuts and across gender lines. The gender tango is thus depicted as a quest for dominance, a power play, with the question who blinks first – a mild illustration of the trope *Dèdè n dẹ ku ikú n dẹ Dèdè*. Eventually Julie would pull out the sexual card, going to Austin’s in skimpy dressing and seeking to get him to “blink.” Scenes like this present a coercive rather than referential deployment of sexuality as an instrument of control.

Negotiation of sexual agency and equalisation of sexual standards: *What Women Want; Married Women?; Woman on Top*

Let husbands know

Their wives have sense like them; they see and smell

And have their palates both for sweet and sour

As husbands have.⁷

In other Nollywood films in contemporary modern settings the negotiation of sexual agency in general and of erotic desire in particular is depicted in terms of a female quest for dominance or at least equal access and equalisation of moral standards in the department of sexuality. This is a departure from depictions in traditional settings such as in *Agogo Eewo* and *Forever* (1998), where, as in traditional African male literature, the expression of sexuality, sexual awareness and erotic desire is a male preserve.⁸ Unequal access to sex in a matrimonial situation is taken for granted in *Agogo Eewo*. For example Lape, the queen, says that sometimes the king may not come near her for three weeks. Iyaloja concurs that “that is tough,” and all that a woman is left with in the circumstance is to beg or appeal. In *Forever*, in Justus Esiri’s fairly traditional matrimonial home, the wife Ethel Ekpe had been “banished” to the mat on account of her childlessness (due to perpetual miscarriages which he attributes to witchcraft – her womb “eats up babies”). In one interesting scene, after spreading her mat as usual on the floor, she hesitantly and courageously gestures for a chance to sleep on the bed. After a moment’s pause and a condescending look, the husband waves her over to the bed. She falls pregnant from the resulting off-camera coition! By contrast, in films like *What Women Want* (2003), *Wild Romance* (2003) or *Queen of Aso Rock* (2005), women are depicted as not only being more open about erotic desires but also as being more insistent on equality in sexual access, among other manifestations of sex-gender partnership, and as manifestation of assertion of rights in social spheres. Lucy (Mary-Ann Appolo) informs her husband of her sexual frustration and would “never take that [tiredness, age, etc., O.-O] as an excuse.” She also informs her friends. In the film, women’s wants are interestingly depicted through different female characters, with thematic exposition showing that a combination of these wants and needs is what makes for a fulfilling female life experience. Agatha (Eucharika Amunobi Ekwu) is concerned about reaching the zenith of her career; Thelma (Oby Okafor) is childless; Ify’s (Ngozi Ezeonu) children are her only consolation; she has no job and feels sometimes like a second class citizen in the house;

⁷ Emilia in Shakespeare’s *Othello* Act IV Sc 3, 876.

⁸ This phenomenon is dwelt upon in my recent lecture “Female Sexuality in African Literature and Culture” (Oloruntuba-Oju 2006).

Lucy has a BMW convertible and other gifts from a generous husband but wants satisfaction in 'vital areas,' a requirement that turns out not to be peculiar to her. The women form a "Girls Time Out" group where on appointed days they have no-holds-barred discussions on gender relations and peculiar problems arising from this.

In this negotiation of wants and of relations, their method of obtaining satisfaction or succour may sometimes be unorthodox and they often get into trouble with moral codes that appear skewed (Lucy and Ify are discovered with their secret lovers and disowned). Whichever way, dominance is an issue, and is often phrased in combative language, as when Agatha tells a new group recruit that she is "on the way to the best major victory in marriage", which is the acquisition of sexual agency and dominance.

In *Married Women?* (2001) and *Woman on Top* (2005), the issue of sex, gender and dominance is treated against the backdrop of male and female double standard respectively. *Married Women?* opens on a note of irony, with a steamy illicit sex scene involving, not a married woman as might be anticipated from the title, but a married man, Mr Brown (Saint Obi) and a single girl, Celia (Elfreda Rowland). Alternate camera shots show the suffering of Brown's doting and anxious wife, Progress (Barbara Udoh). The film is devoted to her transformation, partly in response to her husband's philandering, but due also to promptings from the "Excellent Ladies Club," which, like the Girls Time Out group in *What Women Want*, shows female organisation around the topic of empowerment, sex and dominance.

Although the film apparently sets out to redress the imbalance in male double standard, it ends up being a study in double standard per excellence. The film itself is guilty of double standard, as it shows relative accommodation for male double standard while coming down heavily on female counter-negotiation of erotic agency. However, it is clear that in the case of Progress at least, she is a "straight" wife until her husband's philandering behaviour "liberates" her own latent sexual potentials. *Woman on Top* reverses the sex-gender equation. Nancy (Stephanie Okereke), "so reckless yet so pretty," is the "player" the "cheat." She is also enamoured of the gender dominance issue and is equally boastful in her language ("I'm in

control"). The title of the film is not about coital posture but about reverse gender socio-psychological dominance. Nancy is the one who manipulates. The tango turns violent and deadly as Kelvin strives to regain dominance.

From bedroom to boardroom: Queen of Aso Rock; High Street Girls

Films like *Queen of Aso Rock* (2005) and *High Street Girls* (2002) provide representations of the deployment of sexuality towards the attainment of political power. *High Street Girls* fits into this model only by default, more in breach than by design. The film is set primarily in the transactional domain. Three university graduates, Juliet Jones or JJ (Lilian Bach), Mandy (Shan George) and Zino (Tricia Esiegebe) find themselves in the unemployment market and decide to set up shop jointly on the high street. The opening montage is a street walk and open car ride by the girls, with extreme close-ups on vital statistics, including heel and knee-level shots that show exquisite shoes and sexy legs. The ostentatious parade seems to proclaim to society that "this is what you've made us and this is what we chose to remain as." The girls reject the option of marriage in order not to have to "depend on men." The montage also has the potential to activate the audience's voyeuristic expectation – subsequent scenes show a lot of flesh and a lot of sex, even if, as is usually the case in African cinema, *cuts* and *pans* and other *veiling* manoeuvres are used to screen off prime porn visuals.

A high point of drama in the film is the noisy ritual dance that the girls do around heaps of currency notes after a successful deal. The scene is sufficiently repeated to constitute a "chorus." Indeed the girls' "High Street Babes" song during this ritual is one of the most remembered aspects of the film. As in the film, *Outkast* (which incidentally also stars Shan George and Lilian Bach), the girls' choice of married men is deliberate, not only because they mostly happen to be the ones with money but also because the arrangement eases the burden of guilt – the men are after all cheating on their wives; there is no crime in fleecing or blackmailing them. The primary motivation is pecuniary. The possibility of exerting political influence through sexual agency is a discovery made somewhere along the line when the girls realise that most of their clientele belong to the political class. They try to hack into the political system through the same system of blackmail. However, their 'quest' for power is neither systematic nor focused; only

incidental, and subjected to pecuniary pursuits. This is why this film only succeeds partially as a bedroom-to-boardroom model of power.

Queen of Aso Rock fits more into this model. "Aso Rock" is the real-life name of the Nigerian Presidential Palace in Abuja. The film is firmly located in the political terrain, with all the dirt, intrigue, corruption and horse-trading. Maryam (Omotola Jolaade Ekeinde) is well situated in the power Villa as Personal Assistant to the Vice-President, no mean achievement considering that many hop from bed to bed to secure jobs in the VP's kitchen, according to Halima (Nora Roberts), the cantankerous wife to the VP. Needless to say, there is no love lost between Halima and beautiful Maryam, the VP's PA. However, whereas Maryam is consort to a few men in the corridors of power, she carries out her duties "diligently and with great respect for your family" as she tries in vain to assure the VP's wife. The audience feels very little pity for the VP's wife when after carefully arranged scenes which stir expectation (motorcades, domestic scene in the VP's villa where the wife supervises the reception banquet, lashing out at domestic staff, etc.), news arrives that the VP has died.

It is this incident and the search for a new VP that installs Maryam, as power broker within the villa. She is determined to make her favourite consort, Gambari Dasuki (Rich Oganihu) the new Vice-President, ahead of political heavyweights and favourites like Idris Garuba (Enebeli Elebuwa). The link between female sexuality and power is carefully constructed through characterization and action-sequence. Maryam possesses credentials that a number of men also have: intelligence, even a touch of ingenuity, a "grand design," a confident poise, sexual confidence and agency, and some luck, plus feminine charm, which men generally do not possess. Her conscious plan is to be the hand behind the throne. With the President of the country more out of the country than within (an allusion to the actual criticism of the current President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo), the VP, and herself as the power behind him, become the virtual ruler. Maryam soon dubs herself "The Queen" of the Villa, Aso Rock. The sound track "All hail the queen" complements her rising profile.

The film makes a gendered statement by exposing – through a woman – the corruption of men in the corridors of power. However, the question

whether the best “man” for the job is indeed a woman also crops up inevitably. Maryam’s language soon acquires nuances of power and authority (“I will make you the Vice-President;” “You will be sworn in Gambari, don’t worry;” “I said so didn’t I?” “He is just a pawn in my hands;” “I made you and can unmake you”). As the language becomes more brazen, the movie moves at a fast pace towards a predictable denouement. Maryam’s demand for a greater chunk of power begins to appear overbearing. Suspense heightens as the mission that she has set herself to becomes more complicated. Would she survive the assassination plan already put in place by Idris Garuba? Is her resort to blackmail justifiable? The gender question also comes to the fore: How would *she* do it against all those powerful men? Can she survive stepping on all those powerful toes, including those of the ruling party Chairman who warns her not to step into the affairs of “men who are men”? And then, what would she do with all that power? Is she not already showing signs of the corruption that power notoriously carries with it?

The answers to these questions are important, but even more important is the fact that the sex-gender issue comes to the fore as a deliberate process of filmic exposition and exploration in Nollywood. Even if Maryam does overreach herself and fall to extreme ambition in the end⁹, her exciting film run provides a view of female agency which can be modified towards perfection, much better than a perpetual relegation, subordination or dismissal of female potential.

Governance and gendered combat: *Women in Power; Women’s Cot*

Women’s Cot (2005) and *Women in Power* (2005) draw attention to themselves by virtue of their location in the domain of politics and concern with the gendered nature of sex and dominance. The sworn objective of Loyce (Patience Ozorkwo) in *Women in Power* and Ezenwanyi (Bukky Ajayi) in *Women’s Cot* is to forcefully stop male dominance in domestic and public spheres, and in governance. The two films are also united in quality of production as well as in parading some of the long standing, well established and effective stars of Nollywood, including Olu Jacobs, his wife Joke Jacobs (nee Silver), Dejumol Lewis who had been stage, television and

⁹ The film runs into three parts, with the third part titled *Fall of the Queen of Hasso Rock*.

film icons in the country since the late sixties, Onyeka Onwenu who had also been a music star, Zack Orji, Liz Benson and others.

Women in Power (2005) provides a relieving video view of the quest for dominance or gender equality in the domain of power without explicit sexual agency, even though the film is situated within the province of gender as site of contest and basis of negotiation. The film is set against the background of the UN-Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing of 1995 (dubbed "Toronto Conference" in the film). The film's opening montage shows women returning from the conference and reporting its intellectual, ideological and feminist power ("Every single woman really had something to offer") and its concrete potential for empowerment ("For once my husband is listening," etc). With alternating camera cuts, there is focus on the two major women characters, Loyce and Maureen, who have been met separately by their husbands at the airport. Both women belong to the Women's wing of the ruling political party, with Maureen as President. The film represents opposing views of women's liberation and opposing attitudes in women's struggles.

An accommodationist perspective is interestingly pitched against an exclusionary model of cross-gender interaction. With the former, empowerment is negotiated within existing institutions and cultures dominated by patriarchy. Marriage, especially non-egalitarian wifhood, succession, inheritance and widowhood are recognized as sites of negotiation, but cross-gender partnership is privileged as the preferred mode of struggle. Within the latter model, frequently associated with radical feminism, revolutionary dislodgement of patriarchy is a prime objective and negotiation strategy. Both *Women in Power* and *Women's Cot* juxtapose these options through action sequence, visual images as well as dialogue. Alternating close ups contrast Loyce's stony demeanour with Maureen's amiable visage; in one family there is rapport and rapproachment; in the other rancour and discord.

Still these images do not conceal the kernel of the conflict, which is relative access to political power and social visibility. In the film, each opposing character functions as a thematic device and instrument for propaganda. Loyce traces the fact that there are only 10 women out of 40 ministers in the

country to disempowerment in domestic settings (“It’s no longer going to be like before when you stall all my ambition [...] just because I obey you as my husband”). Her empowerment strategy is to seize initiative and control at the domestic level, and launch herself into politics, from where to launch a national attack on male dominance in private and public spheres. Soon she wrests the presidency of the Women’s Wing of the ruling party from Maureen’s “timid leadership” and bulldozes her way into a ministerial position (“You are a powerful woman,” the Party Chairman admits). Different expository scenes show her attempting to alter stereotypical socialization processes in domestic situations (subtly preventing her daughter from attending to domestic activities and pushing her son in that direction; instructing her daughter she has to “stand up to men”) and in official cum socio-political situations (putting down male subordinates: “You think you’re smart because you are a man,” etc). She finds herself unfortunately alone. Predictably, she is soon consumed by well established forces.

The other film, *Women’s Cot*, introduces actional complexity, as well as sex and sexuality. Employing the metaphor of crib or cradle, the “women’s cot” association is borne of genuine necessity following the inhuman treatment of widows by their in-laws in some Nigerian cultures. Indeed, the term “Women’s Cot” is used interchangeably with “Widow’s Cot” in the film’s dialogue, while the latter term (“Widow’s Cot”) is used exclusively in the songs. The culture is depicted as male-sustained – brothers in-law gang up against widows who do not have male children to deprive them of their late husbands’ wealth; the Igwe, traditional ruler, supports their action in the name of tradition (“inheritance matters are never discussed in the kitchen” i.e. this is a male affair), etc. However, the women’s *cot* established by Joyce (Joke Silver) with the assistance of Adanma (Onyeka Onwenu) is unfortunately hijacked and transformed to a women’s *cult* by the dreaded Ezenwanyi, “Queen of Queens,” as translated in the film. Ezenwanyi is a metaphysically powered vampire who thrives on male blood. Unknown to Joyce, Ezenwanyi had always been, through Adanma, the unseen puppeteer behind the finances and activities of the cot. Ezenwanyi’s son is currently state governor, but she plans to eliminate him to create “the very first woman governor.” The “anointed one” is wife to the current Deputy Governor. Her task is also to eliminate her husband.

This negative transformation creates a conflict in the original objectives of the “women’s cot”, and some interesting developments in the film’s action sequence. Suddenly there is a rapid turnover in male mortality. Many wives are anxious to join the rank of widows and are resorting to self-help, with promptings from Ezenwanyi’s faction of the Women’s Cot/Cult (“How much does it take to make a widow!”). Sex again turns into a tool. Women are encouraged not only to seduce men but also to accommodate welcome and unwelcome sexual advances as a way of bringing the men under their ambit of influence and control, to “subdue them”: “Sex is the greatest lubricant to power; seduction the greatest talisman on earth”, says Adanma (Onyeka Onwenu) in the film. The screen colour turns perpetually red, awash with blood and the colours of Ezenwanyi’s cult of death. The sound track expresses *logicacophony*, a grating logical inconsistency as the track switches between the song in English on the plight of widows (“Life has no mercy, on the widow ...”) and the song in Pidgin encouraging women to transit quickly from wifehood to widowhood (“Kill your husband, make your life better ...”). Again, the film depicts gendered combat turning deadly, recalling the trope *Dèdè n dẹ ku ikú n dẹ Dèdè* over issues of sex, gender and dominance.

Conclusion

What the films exhibited in the foregoing demonstration is a deliberate orchestration of the interplay of sex and power in an African context, the correlation of sexual agency with power and dominance, and the complex manifestation of gendered contest at various levels in domestic and public spheres. Admittedly, some of the filmic representations of this phenomenon may be quite banal. Also, the resolution of conflict in the films (including those by women script writers) tends to echo gender stereotypes. The sense that power can be dangerous in the hands of women is persistent and strong. Women who attempt a revolutionary shake-down of the established gendered order are depicted as engaging in extremes of conduct that lead inevitably to their downfall. Their posture is juxtaposed with that of those women who assume accommodative positions and who, by implication, are held up as correct models. Still, the films frame a growing openness about sex and sexuality discourse that has never been witnessed on the Nigerian

cultural scene. The potential for the expansion of this discourse and its absorption into issues of development and polity is, at the very least, encouraging. The frames are not frozen, but dissolving and developing into complex sequences.

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