

## Reading Video Film and Narrative Commerce in West Africa

In some segments of the urban West African population today, fictional narratives created locally are more likely to be watched on video film rather than read in a book or listened to on radio. Tunde Kelani, considered one of the most successful video film directors in Nigeria, and who has adapted the works of at least one Yoruba-language author to video film, reveals his awareness of this trend in the following statement: "We found that our people are no more interested in reading, and by so doing, we are missing the great values and virtues embedded in the works of great writers..." (Abiola 14). Lower literacy rates alone do not account for the apparent lack of interest in literature.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of structural adjustment programs pursued in many countries, the accumulation of wealth and access to leisure time is not as clearly tied to advanced education and a personal investment in reading. African publishers also face considerable challenges in making non-commercial fiction available to local audiences. In many instances, the secular non-commercial fiction book is both unavailable and unaffordable.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Literacy levels for Nigeria and Ghana, the two countries considered here are actually reasonably high by West African standards. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics gives 74.4% as the literacy rate for adult males in Nigeria and 59.4% as the rate for adult females. In the age range of 15 to 24 years, the literacy rate for Nigerian males rises to 90.7% and for females to 86.5%. In Ghana, the literacy rate for adult males is 62.9% and 45.7% for adult females. We can compare these results to a literacy rate of 18% for males and 8.1% for females in Burkina Faso. The literacy rates are displayed on the following website: [http://uis.unesco.org/profiles/HN/GEN/countryProfile\\_cn.aspx?code=5660](http://uis.unesco.org/profiles/HN/GEN/countryProfile_cn.aspx?code=5660)

<sup>2</sup> One type of print narrative that appears to be doing relatively well is the evangelical narrative in print, sold at religious bookstores, but also at major religious conventions and on the premises of many churches. While these narratives are not produced mainly for commercial purposes, they have succeeded in generating their own captive audience

Increasingly, in parts of urban West Africa, the "best-seller" if one might call it that is not a narrative in print, but a narrative in digital video format. Non-commercial fiction attracts an even smaller West African readership except it is adopted in the curricula of local educational institutions. Writing in 1996, William Bgoya (169), a leading figure in the African publishing industry described the decline in fiction publishing observed all over Africa as most acute in West Africa. The infrastructure required to sustain publication and dissemination of non-commercial creative writing, comprising publishers, distribution networks and schools, is in weakened state as one more casualty of insufficient government spending on education. Newer authors in particular find it difficult to get published, and even harder to generate a local readership. And though the percentage of literates is slowly inching upwards in some African countries, for a variety of reasons, this increase does not seem likely to translate into more reading of the kinds of texts that we describe as literature.

Conditions for significantly expanded publication of non-commercial creative writing as one form of mass-produced narrative in much of Africa now appear less favorable than might have been anticipated in the 1960s. For one thing, new technologies are making it easier to bypass print altogether in the production of narratives for mass consumption. In the current environment, and more so than in other parts of the world, different types of funding linked to accessible technologies have become the predominant factors shaping the format and content of mass-produced narrative in West Africa. Commercial considerations are at the forefront of narrative production for mass distribution and the video film has supplanted the book because it represents a more profitable mass medium for telling and selling stories.

Moreover, the organization of the stories on video film is closely tied to the agenda of small-scale investors seeking quick profits for their investments in filmmaking. It is equally related to the ambitions of individual West Africans unaffiliated with larger corporations who wish to sell stories to the largest possible audience using the meager technological resources at their disposal. In this paper, I will consider how the intersection between newer technologies and a marketplace comprising small-scale investors is shaping mass-produced narrative in West Africa, and driving the trend towards

outside of the school system. In other words, the problems I am discussing here affect mostly newer and secular authors of non-commercial fiction who cannot be certain of getting their works published or adopted in school curricula.

serialization. In addition, I would also like to examine the implications of the changing prospects for literature and authorship in West Africa, signified by the turn towards new media and the growing commercialization of narrative. Publishers of serious fiction have always had to heed the bottom line, even in societies with much higher levels of literacy. Richard Todd (9) has suggested for example, that canon-formation in the West today is increasingly subject to changing market forces. But the attention given to commercial considerations by publishers of serious fiction has often been mediated by the equal weight extended to notions of "artistic" merit as defined by respected professionals and institutions in the society. In the case of the famous African Writers Series of Heinemann Educational Publishers with its head office in Britain, both James Currey and Becky Clarke as former editors have alluded to the tensions that sometimes developed between editors who had the responsibility of approving new titles for publication and financial managers primarily focused on maintaining adequate profit margins. These and other accounts by various writers and editors make it clear that their selections and choices were not made only with financial gain in mind.<sup>3</sup> If from the 1960s to the 1990s, the published African literature text was the result of negotiations between writers, editors and financial managers among others, one would have to conclude that writers and editors, pursuing an agenda that was not wholly constrained by commercial concerns, were major contenders in those negotiations.

Fewer such opportunities currently exist for secular West African writers to achieve publication without first accommodating the demands of financial managers. To start with, the managers are well aware of the fact that even university students, who could constitute a prime market for their products, are more likely to rely on photocopies and pirated editions than they are to buy original copies of any published text (Kirkpatrick 37). Without some bestsellers on the company list, it becomes increasingly hard for editors and financial managers to take risks on a manuscript that might not sell well. The recent cancellation of the African Writers Series by Heinemann Educational Publishers is only one more indication of the longer shadow that commercial considerations currently cast over the publication of African non-commercial fiction. Accordingly and in urban West Africa today, the design of secular

3 Simon Gikandi's recollection (5-6) of discussions at Heinemann's over possible publication of a novel by Dambudzo Marechera in the 1970s again shows editors using non-financial criteria in their assessment of creative works.

mass-produced narratives destined for widespread local distribution frequently objectifies assumptions made about what it takes to please an audience and earn a profit. A culture of technical and discursive reiteration also predominates, so that authors and or directors secure rights to artistic license only by first becoming commercially successful.

The commercialization of narrative is responsible for the turn towards video film as well as the growing incidence of serialization in West African video film narratives. Video films enable cheap reproduction while serialized narratives emerge, notes Robert Allen, to "exploit new technologies of narrative production and distribution" (1). Video film technology offers these possibilities in West Africa, by enabling the production of a particular type of narrative, which serves the commercial interests of producers and directors, and whose appeal for the audience lies in the fact that it offers scenes of certain, though deferred retribution for victims of injustice.

This discussion on video film narrative will concentrate on Nigeria and Ghana as the two countries currently producing the highest number of narratives on video film in West Africa. While the video film industry in both countries developed following distinct trajectories, video film has become one of the predominant media for the dissemination of locally produced serial narratives in the urban centers of these countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Serialization of narratives as it is currently practised in those countries is related to the unique properties of the widely accessible technology of video filmmaking. The narratives in question are produced directly for video, and narratives spread over two or more video cassettes or video CDs, released independently of each other over a period of several months, are quite commonplace. It is clear that practices of serialization are at work in Ghanaian and Nigerian video film narratives and I have chosen to treat them as such, while describing them as "short serials." Furthermore, and in examining these video film narratives, I will distinguish between two types of short serials in terms of their themes: the social issues drama and the domestic drama. The domestic drama usually focuses on conflict between conjugal partners, while the social issues drama explores other types of conflict within the extended family as well as in the society at large.

Ghanaian and Nigerian short serials do differ in some ways from serial and episodic narratives found in other media in West Africa and in other parts of the world. On the one hand, these multi-part video film narratives are not like television serials since resolution of the main crisis in the narrative must be accomplished within a couple of installments, and cannot be prolonged for

months and even years, as happens with soap operas elsewhere in the world. On the other hand, successive installments of most West African video film narratives since the late 1990s are also not identical to sequels as seen, for example, in American or European commercial films. In particular, the first installment of West African serialized video film narratives often ends without a clear resolution of the conflicts at the heart of the narrative. Even when there are sequels in many American and European films, each film presents a self-contained narrative with at least a partial resolution of the plot, though some or all of the same major characters feature in successive narratives. By contrast, the second installment in many Ghanaian and Nigerian video films often seems to start *in medias res*, so that making sense of the second installment without having watched the first installment becomes difficult in the less skilfully done films. In order to understand why this pattern of serialization has come to characterize many Nigerian and Ghanaian video film narratives, it is useful to revisit the impact of television broadcasting on the production of fictional narratives in West Africa.

### Broadcasting Fictional Narratives on Nigerian Television

In general, serialization is tied to the commercialization of fictional narratives, and West Africa is no exception to this rule. Speaking about soap operas in Britain as one kind of serial narrative, Hobson (xii) notes: "For the audience they are entertainment; for the producers and broadcasters they are business. The two needs are inseparable and mutually compatible." Though operating within a different institutional framework, successful video film directors in Nigeria like Peace Fiberesima and Lancelot Imasuen have likewise invoked the possibility of increased sales as the predominant reason for breaking Nigerian video film narratives into two or more separate installments. According to Imasuen, while the story contained in one film might sell 20,000 copies, the same story divided between two videocassettes or video CDs might sell 30 to 40,000 copies. Re-makes of successful film narratives are standard practice and provide more opportunities to make money from the same story. In the world of narrative production as business undertaking, originality is valued only to

the extent that it results in commercial success, so that producers approach successful narratives mainly as templates for further reproduction.<sup>5</sup>

For Nigerian authors, producers and directors interested in reaching the largest number of people with certain narratives, video film has the further advantage of being an accessible technology. Though some of those involved in the Nigerian video film industry are university graduates, this industry is not dominated by university graduates with specialized training in film production. Individuals without advanced levels of education and with no formal training in film production have been able to enter the industry, exploit the technology, and achieve financial success as actors, directors, producers, and camera operators among others.

More people also have an opportunity of watching the films since access to the films is not constrained by either the need for advanced literacy or some degree of privacy. Living arrangements and working conditions for many Africans seldom provide a suitable environment for the singular act of reading. As a result, the time consuming activity of reading lengthy novels can seem like an anti-social undertaking in some contexts, while viewing of video films with company reaffirms social ties. Such attention to sociality is especially critical in societies where success and survival still significantly depend on high investment in kin networks.

Obviously, all Nigerians do not own VCRs, but enough people own VCRs in Nigeria to make the production of narratives a profitable business for video film directors and producers.<sup>6</sup> It is no accident, therefore, that a viable video film industry emerged in Nigeria rather than elsewhere on the continent. As the African country with the largest population and potentially millions of video film viewers, producers and directors could spread their risk over a larger population and be assured of a profit by targeting local audiences within the country, even if they did not reap the benefits of sales outside Nigeria.

In addition, video film technology offered a chance to earn greater profits from the marketing of stage performances, by bypassing television

4 During separate interviews held at the Nollywood Uprising conference organized in Los Angeles California in June 2005, Peace Fiberesima and Lancelot Imasuen provided information on their personal experience with serialization of narratives in the Nigerian video film industry.

5 Imasuen explained for example that financiers who invest in Nigerian video film production will often insist on the creation of a narrative identical to one which has been very successful rather than allowing the director to pursue a completely new project. Only directors who have a good track record in terms of sales may be able to persuade financiers to invest in the production of an original narrative.

6 Barrot (22) reports that a 2003 poll found that 67% of urban households in Nigeria owned a VCR of VCD player.

stations owned by governments or business conglomerates, as a means of delivering such performances to a potential audience. Starting in the 1960s, the move in Nigeria from live performance to television, then to celluloid production and ultimately to video film, stemmed from a desire on the part of those actually creating narratives for performance to find a technology over which they exercised direct control. It was also hoped that this technology would deliver more of the profits from marketing such narratives directly to them.

Barber recounts, for example, the numerous difficulties that traveling theater troupes faced when working with the sole institution in charge of television broadcasting in Nigeria in the 1980s, namely the Nigerian Television Authority. Although production on television gave the actors and their companies greater exposure to the public, they did not find the NTA a dependable business partner. Barber (245-246) reports that the television authority defaulted on payments, did not respect copyright, and paid royalties only haphazardly. Financial considerations were thus at the forefront of the decision of some traveling theater companies to begin experimenting with film in the early 1980s. According to Barber, "Films were seen by the theater companies as far preferable to television drama in every way, above all because the theater company retained control of the product" (259). In other words, the theater company exercised greater control over the profits to be gained from the production of these narratives in audiovisual format. And once some theater companies began film production, the transition from film to video soon occurred due to the cheaper production costs associated with video film.<sup>7</sup>

But it was not only the traveling theater groups that encountered financial problems with broadcasting on Nigerian television in the 1980s. Zeb Ejiro, who went on to become one of the most successful directors of video film in Nigeria, started out producing soap operas for Nigerian television. Here the challenge was one of securing corporate sponsorship for a drama series broadcast by the Nigerian Television Authority. Speaking about his own experience directing the soap opera *Ripples* for the NTA, Ejiro remarked "Getting sponsors in Nigeria is a horror..." (Lasode 180). After a dispute between the NTA and sponsors for soap operas on NTA in 1992, many

companies cancelled their sponsorship, and *Ripples* as well as other locally produced soap operas were shown without commercial breaks till the end of the season (Lasode 182). Clearly, these developments were not conducive to the further production of fictional serials and other kinds of narratives for television under the continued aegis of the NTA. By the early 1990s, some of the most popular shows on Nigerian television like the drama, *Arehu*, were being produced by professionals who had left the NTA to form private companies (Lasode 179). Ejiro, too, took up production on video film and eventually abandoned the production of soap opera for broadcast on television stations. So also did Amaka Igwe who directed *Checkmate*, which was undoubtedly the most successful English-language soap opera on NTA stations in the early 1990s (Lasode 182; Haynes and Okome 44).

While the path leading to the emergence of a video film industry in Ghana does not appear to have been exactly identical to the Nigerian experience, there are in Ghana, too, indications of a latent tension between those who are now involved in video film production and the management of television stations in the country.<sup>8</sup> In the opinion of at least one Ghanaian film director, Kofi Yirenkyi, Ghanaian television stations have lately gotten into the practice of broadcasting mainly Nigerian video films to the detriment of the Ghanaian film industry, because they probably show most of these Nigerian films without paying royalties to the producers who do not live in Ghana.<sup>9</sup> If by contrast, they showed Ghanaian films on Ghanaian television, the Ghanaian producers of these films could conceivably use the legal system to compel them to pay appropriate royalties. In any case, the consequences are similar: directors and producers of feature narratives on screen in Nigeria and Ghana prefer, where possible, to remain separate from the television broadcasting industry, in order to better control the profits that might emanate from the marketing of their products.

7 Sec Barber and Adesanya for information on this transition. Kofi Yirenkyi who has used the concert party formula in his films confirms a somewhat similar situation for Ghana saying that production on celluloid is now out of the question given the costs.

8 In urban Ghana, too, the popularity of stage performance in the concert party tradition seems to have declined considerably to the benefit of video film (Cole 160). Stage performances in the concert party tradition have also in the past been broadcast on television (Cole 10, 116), though there is little evidence to suggest that concert party practitioners ever worked as closely with television stations as happened with some Yoruba traveling theater groups in Nigeria.

9 Most Ghanaian television stations have a slot in their weekly schedule variously titled "African cinema" or "Local movie" or "African movie" etc. The overwhelming majority of films shown during this slot are Nigerian video films in English.

### Social Issues Dramas as Serial Narratives

Where commercial considerations are paramount in the emergence of a narrative style, those who create such narratives have clear motivations for extending the narrative for as long as possible, but they must do so in ways which have an appeal for their designated audience. In turning to video technology, authors and producers of fictional narratives in West Africa have had to balance their financial need to prolong the narrative with the audience's desire for a suitable kind of resolution. They have also had to take into account the constraints imposed by their chosen technology. While broadcasting on television provides the means for serialization over the long term, serials on video, must of necessity have a more limited scope, since delivery of the narrative to audiences at regular intervals cannot be guaranteed. Ultimately, it is in the financial interest of video film directors to impose closure within two or three installments, since there are no benefits to further extending the narrative except one is using a technology ensuring regular access to the unfolding narrative for a targeted audience.

Not surprisingly then, the majority of Nigerian and Ghanaian video serials are in two to three parts or installments. Comedies are hardly ever presented in this format, and it is more often used for narratives that might be classified as dramas with a heavy melodramatic edge.<sup>10</sup> I propose the term social issues narratives to describe these dramas. Most commonly, serialized narratives on video film represent practices considered controversial and scandalous: prostitution, incest, murder of family members, homosexuality, infidelity, political impropriety, the breaking of religious vows, etc. Exposing these scandalous practices and especially the tragic consequences associated with them offers the audience a chance to experience plausible fears followed by vicarious relief.

The first installment of these video film narratives usually ends with an evil deed of such egregious proportions that it begs for justice. However, by the conclusion of the first film, no one has been punished for this evil deed,

10 The goal is to encourage viewers to go out and buy new films, and producers of video film comedies achieve a similar effect by typecasting actors. Thus for example, Chinedu Ikedieze and Osita IHEME nicknamed Aki and Pawpaw have acted as a pair in several Nigerian video film comedies. The characters they play may have different names from one film to the next, but they almost always have the same attributes, and in encountering them in successive films, one almost gets the impression that one is watching an episodic series with recurring characters.

and it in fact remains a mystery for most of the major characters in the narrative. It may be murder, break-up of a family, loss of wealth, of employment or residence, and even disease, always precipitated by one or more villains. There is often an element of dramatic irony at the end of the first installment because the audience is usually aware of the identity of the guilty party whose actions precipitated this state of affairs. Unlike the audience, many of the characters in the story have no clue what is happening or have cast their suspicions on an innocent individual. Ending the first installment at this point gives the audience an incentive to watch out for later installments where the audience expects to see enough retribution and revenge to compensate for the injustices viewed in the earlier section of the story.

The Nigerian video film, *Billionaire's Club* by Chico Ejiro is a good example of this type of story and the impact of commercialization on narrative production. It appears to be a remake of an earlier and extremely successful Igbo-language video film, *living in Bondage*, and is at the same time a serial narrative. Like the earlier video film, *Billionaire's Club* is the story of a young married man, Zed, with an adoring wife, Victoria, trying to make ends meet in a bad economic situation.<sup>11</sup> Victoria who comes from a somewhat wealthier background is satisfied with their circumstances, but Zed is desperate to impress her and to provide adequately for his wife and their new baby. Zed runs into an old college classmate, Don, whose lavish lifestyle astonishes him. Don promises to show him how to get rich and to make him a member of the club of billionaires. It turns out that Zed must offer his baby as a sacrifice to a strange figure with supernatural powers whom members of the club worship in order to become wealthy. Reluctantly, he agrees to comply, but is unaware that his wife who finds his conduct suspicious is following him when he sneaks out with the baby. At the location where the baby is to be murdered, Victoria's presence is discovered and it is decided that she too has to be eliminated. The film ends with Zed organizing a funeral for his wife and child after claiming that both were killed in a car accident.

Retribution and resolution are always deferred to the next and second installment of the narrative in these short serials. As Hobson (3) points out

11 I have thought it useful to provide a plot summary for most of the films discussed here, bearing in mind the possibility that readers of this paper may not have had an opportunity of watching any of the films. Access for those who do not live in West Africa or have contact with the West African diaspora abroad may be limited as the films more commonly circulate through informal and poorly regulated distribution networks.

with respect to soap operas, serial narratives are often moral, and always on the side of right. So also it is in Nigerian and Ghanaian short serials. Commercials used to advertise the second installment of a story on television focus on the outrageous actions committed in the first installment, almost as if to remind viewers that justice has not yet been done. Later installments of the story also feature many reminders of the terrible deeds done in the past, more commonly in the form of visions, dreams, and hallucinations rather than as flashbacks. Accordingly, the bloody ghost of the murdered Victoria is a frequent presence in the second installment of this story, titled *Millionaire !r Club 2*. It does occasionally happen that the police and the courts step in to dispense justice in these social issues films. More commonly, however, the guilty experience judgment in their bodies through physical and mental deterioration. Madness on the one hand, and wasting of the body on the other, are typical signs of justice being done. For example, all the members of the Billionaire's Club that Zed joins have to live with curious ailments. One member, who has what looks like a nest of maggots festering on his head, is never seen without a cap used to cover his unsightly condition. Zed too develops repulsive and painful sores all over his body, and ultimately dies.

Many directors refer to supernatural agency in their films since it allows them to conclude the story in what appears to be an equitable manner without having to create an elaborate explanation that would more clearly tie together all the loose ends of the plot. Without Victoria's ghost appearing to Zed, for example, members of the community might never have been aware of the fact that he was responsible for his wife's death. The strange and "spiritual" disease which afflicts him towards the end, saves the director from having to create an implausible situation where the police would intervene to prosecute a crime without any evidence to back up their case. But equally as important, these spiritual forms of justice and the liberal use of the *deus ex machina* have considerable appeal, because they enable the film directors to present resolutions that are both locally desired and locally credible. The narratives express certainty that characters distinguished by their anti-social deeds will be judged, but also acknowledge that such matters cannot be entrusted to the formal institutions of the society and thus depend on supernatural agency. Furthermore, the interrupted narrative style of the films suggests a mode of engagement with real life challenges by intimating that justice deferred does not mean justice denied.

### Domestic Dramas

One of the most skilled directors of video film serial narratives in West Africa is the Ghanaian, Veronica Quarshie. She and her husband, Samuel Nai are responsible for some of the best-known serial narratives in Ghanaian video film practice.<sup>12</sup> They typically collaborate on the screenplay for their films. Quarshie then directs actual production of the film while Samuel Nai takes charge of editing. Together they have overseen the production of what is perhaps the most successful serial narrative in Ghanaian video film practice thus far. The story of the Ansah family and its interactions with the beautiful single woman, Effe Thompson has so far extended over five video tapes. The first installment of the narrative, *A Stab in the Dark* was released in 1999. The story continued in subsequent videos: *A Stab in the Dark 2*, *Ripples*, *Ripples 2* and *Rage*. *Ripples* is subtitled *A Stab in the Dark 3*, while *Rage* is subtitled *Ripples 3*. In addition to this family saga, Quarshie has directed several other two-part video serials, somewhat in the common pattern discussed earlier. However, the story that started with *A Stab in the Dark* is arguably her best accomplishment and makes a significant contribution to the West African practice of producing short serials on video film.

The central character in this short serial is Effe, a pretty young woman who goes from being a very bad girl to an innocent victim over the course of the narrative. At the beginning of the story, Effe is a young lady who prefers dating much older and usually married men. To escape her mother's criticism of her conduct, she arranges to spend the holidays at the home of her best friend, Kate, whose family is very wealthy. Effe however begins an affair with Kate's father Victor. When the affair is discovered, Effe and Victor are unapologetic. Victor throws his own daughter, Kate, out of the house, for daring to complain about this affair, and in response, his wife, Ivy, too leaves home. Kate makes plans for revenge and eventually orchestrates events leading to the breakup of the affair between Effe and Victor. Effe retaliates by planning further grief for both Kate and Victor. She even turns up at Kate's wedding to Bob and almost succeeds in disrupting the ceremony. However, Effe is eventually defeated, and turns over a new leaf.

Nonetheless, Effe's past continues to haunt her. She is falsely accused of having an affair with the husband of an aunt, who took her in after she

12 Since 2000, several of Quarshie's films, including the short serials discussed here have won numerous awards at the annual Ghana Film Awards competition.

made the decision to avoid entanglements with older married men. Though dejected at this turn of events, she continues to do her best to avoid potentially problematic relationships with men who are either married or otherwise committed. Through the acquaintances she makes at work and at her new place of residence, she discovers that Kate's new husband, Bob is having an affair with a dangerous woman involved in all kinds of criminal undertakings. Effe knows Kate has no reason to trust her, but still takes the decision to warn Kate and to provide information that might help save Kate's marriage and Bob's life. Effe has turned full circle here, going from destroying marriages to saving marriages. The fifth film ends with Kate and Effe renewing their friendship as Kate shows gratitude to Effe for saving her husband and marriage.

This type of story represents a variation on the social issues in drama and might be described as the domestic drama. In Quarshie's domestic dramas, the main cause of turmoil in the family is the actual or attempted infidelity of husbands. In films by other Nigerian and Ghanaian directors, it may be sibling rivalry, infertility, incompetent parents, rebellious children, unwanted pregnancies, or interference from extended family and friends. In any case, there is no shortage of plausible causes for confrontation within the family. Furthermore, the fact that the same type of conflict can be explored with successive conjugal partners makes the domestic drama particularly suitable as a subject for serialization. Thus, for example, in this particular short serial, Quarshie considers the impact of the infidelity of husbands, first with Victor (the father of Effe's best friend Kate), then with the husband of Effe's aunt, and finally with Bob (Kate's husband). Jane Feuer's remarks with respect to American serials are equally applicable here: "... to be happily married on a serial is to be on the periphery of the narrative" (12-13).

Directors like Quarshie are able to produce new films in a shorter turn about period than might have been the case if they were working on celluloid, while remaining independent of local television stations. For example, *A Stab in the Dark 2*, *Ripples*, and *Ripples 2* were all released in 2000, and the precursor story, *A Stab in the Dark* was released just a year earlier. Quarshie has worked with the same producer, Moro Yaro of Princess Productions in Accra, for all of her serial narratives.<sup>13</sup> With somewhat more reliable funding than many Ghanaian and Nigerian film directors and a crew that has worked with her on

several films, she has been able to extend the length of the short serial from the usual two to five installments, by combining the interrupted narrative format of the serial with self-contained episodic narratives. The first installment of the story, *A Stab in the Dark* ends as often happens on a scene of great injustice when Victor's wife and daughter are forced out of their own home. *A Stab in the Dark 2* picks up and concludes the interrupted narrative about Victor's wife and daughter. *Ripples*, the third chapter of the story, is an episodic narrative, while Quarshie returns to the interrupted narrative format with the last two installments in the story.

Female characters are plentiful and prominent in domestic dramas, not necessarily as strong dominant forces, but because the difficulties they encounter in life make for an environment rich in the type of conflict that can be easily prolonged to sustain serialized narration. Two types of female characters predominate in these films: the victim and the bad girl. Every installment in the narrative has at least one and usually a sisterhood of bad girls causing mayhem in various marriages and families. Whether male or female, the perpetrators of evil seem to have the initiative in most domestic and social issues dramas. They are the ones who plot, who execute, who undertake. By contrast, their victims appear frozen in passiveness. In Quarshie's *A Stab in the Dark 2*, Ivy weeps for husband Victor who is now involved with her daughter's best friend, but does nothing to try and get her husband back. In *Rage*, even Kate who had been so combative when her father was having an affair, shows much less resourcefulness and drive when it is her own husband Bob who is suspected of having an affair. In Sunny Collins' *Billionaire's Club 2*, Victoria's mother weeps for her dead daughter and grandchild, but does not otherwise pursue any of her suspicions regarding her former son-in-law.

But the films also appear to indicate that the victims of exploitation, who are often honest women, will be vindicated in the end. One can only speculate at this point, but it is possible that these video film serials hold greater attraction for viewers who see themselves as disadvantaged in real life and unable to win redress for their grievances except in the imaginative world of video film narrative. Viewers who do not hold positions of authority in their professional and personal lives, including many women and young men are perhaps more inclined to read or view these fictions of guaranteed justice because such narratives offer them an arena for resolving challenges which they ordinarily would not have the power to adjudicate.

13 In an interview with the author in 2003, Quarshie stated that she had so far directed 12 films for and with the financial backing of Princess Productions in Accra, Ghana.

In this respect, the social issues and domestic dramas are identical. If, in these narratives, good triumphs over evil in the end, it is not because there is a plan of action set in motion to accomplish this goal. Rather, viewers are given to understand that mysteriously and inevitably, good will triumph over evil, even in the absence of any action from those who might consider themselves aggrieved or victimized. With their decisive endings, Ghanaian and Nigerian short serials almost transform inaction into a personal and social virtue. Perhaps even more importantly, their morally satisfying resolutions enable viewers to forget at least temporarily their own powerlessness and the real-life consequences that flow from the ineffectiveness of institutions that are supposed to dispense justice in their own world.

### The Future of Mass-Produced Narratives in West Africa

There was a time when non-commercial creative texts written by West Africans occupied a more prominent position in the field of mass-produced narratives of local origin circulating in the West African region. With the increased commercialization of narrative and the availability of video film technology in parts of West Africa, that is no longer the case. Those creative writers whose primary interest is not in making money do continue to write and seek publication. But the potential audience's access to such works appears limited. In major bookstores in Ghana and Nigeria, for example, very little shelf space is given to locally authored fiction that does not feature on school curricula.

On the whole then, the major trend in mass-produced narratives in Ghana and Nigeria since the 1990s has been towards lowering production costs and achieving quick turnovers, using formulaic and serialized narratives on video film that both entertain and reassure local audiences in their beliefs. A high proportion of the locally produced video films on the Nigerian market are already serial narratives, and since Quarshie's successful run with her five-part domestic drama, short serials are becoming more commonplace in Ghana as well.<sup>14</sup> In South Africa, by contrast, NGOs with the financial backing of transnational corporations, local conglomerates and international agencies have been able to create a different kind of serial narrative for television with

an emphasis on using serial narrative to entertain and educate the urban poor.<sup>15</sup>

The small-scale investors involved in Nigerian and Ghanaian video film production have more short-term goals as far as their investment is concerned. This explains the appeal of melodramatic plots, cliffhanger endings, the tendency to typecast actors, the focus on scandal and the recourse to supernatural forms of justice. For West African video film directors, the financial rewards of working with small-scale investors are potentially greater, but it does mean that they must more consciously treat their "artistic" work as a commercial commodity designed to sell to the largest number of potential consumers. They must also more consciously adopt narrative strategies which will encourage viewers to buy two or more installments of a single story.

Almost invariably discussions of video film production with Nigerian and Ghanaian directors will turn to questions of funding and the impact of certain types of funding on the stories they tell.<sup>16</sup> Quarshie's serials, like other well-financed video film productions in Nigeria by Tunde Kelani (Adesanya 42; Ogundele 118) represent the high end of the video film market and their films regularly attract higher prices in West African markets.<sup>17</sup> Serialized or not, their narratives have more complex plots, and rarely define characters or provide a resolution to the plot by resorting to supernatural agency alone. Directors like Quarshie and Kelani are apparently interested in achieving a certain quality of production and are not following the pattern of only seeking the lowest production costs that has left its trace on the most widespread narrative style found in video films from Nigeria and Ghana. As Kelani explains it, his activity as a video filmmaker is not motivated by a desire for financial gain. He has said that he became involved in film production in order to protect the cultural heritage of the Yoruba, and to introduce new standards into the video film industry in Nigeria (Abiola4). For her part, Quarshie has

14 Examples include the film *Love and Politics* which has now reached its fourth installment.

15 See Loren Kruger for a discussion of the South African soap opera *Soul City* and the financial network supporting production of this television serial.

16 This has been my experience in interviews with the Ghanaians Quarshie, Mensah, and Yircnkyi, as well as with the Nigerians Imasuen and Fiberesima. See also Trenton Daniel's interview with four leading directors and actors in the Nigerian video film industry.

17 Tunde Kelani directed several short serials in the early to mid 1990s, including *Ti Oluwa Nile* (1-3), *Ayo Ni Mo Fe* (1-2), and *Oleku* (1-2).

stated that she is interested not only in the commercial, but also in other professional dimensions of her career.<sup>18</sup>

Those who produce narratives mainly for financial gain as is the case with the majority of directors and producers of serialized video narratives in Nigeria and Ghana will undoubtedly make a greater effort than authors of non-commercial and other types of narratives to satisfy potential consumers. For Fiberesima, critics of Nigerian video film narratives who complain about the emphasis on mysterious rituals and scandal are misguided, because "The Nigerian film audience controls the content [of the films]."<sup>19</sup> Producers of commercial narratives are more responsive and even beholden to the audiences for their products.

The experience of directors like Kelani in Nigeria and Quarshie in Ghana, does, however, suggest that commercial success and attention to artistic quality are not always incompatible. Indeed and ironically, commercial success has won greater artistic freedom for both directors over the stories they tell. And it is worth noting that their most recent films have not been serial narratives.<sup>20</sup> Kelani, for example, is now in a position to state that he does not cede creative control of his films to financiers or pursue them for financial backing (Daniels 118-19). The fact that both Kelani and Quarshie experience relative autonomy in their interactions with financiers does not mean, though, that the present system consistently works to the benefit of creative license in Ghana and Nigeria. As I have stated earlier, West African video films are associated with a culture of reiteration and imitation rather than with a pursuit of originality. Commercially successful video film narratives thus tend to be reinvented over and over again. Other forms of local support will be required to ensure continued production, staging and dissemination of diverse creative practices including non-commercial narrative. West Africa stands to gain culturally and politically in its civil society

18 Quarshie, interview with the author August 2003.

19 Fiberesima, interview with the author, June 15 2005.

20 Kelani's most recent productions such as *Campus Queen* and *Thunderbolt* have not been serial narratives. Veronica Quarshie's latest film, *The Forbidden Fruit*, is also not a serial narrative. Based on this trajectory, it would seem that success at serialization early in one's career earns interested directors in Ghana and Nigeria subsequent freedom to pursue film projects that do not involve serialization.

from the existence of a sphere of creativity that is not wholly constrained by the laws of the market place.

With the availability of narratives in comic book form, on video film and in other media, access to mass-produced narrative in contemporary West Africa occurs on the basis of a circumvented literacy, relying as much and more on other visual signs than on printed language. Urban viewers of Nigerian and Ghanaian video films often have variable levels of schooling but do not require advanced literacy to "read" these narratives. Though writing screenplays for video film generates new professional opportunities for university graduates in the humanities, directors of video film narratives frequently circumvent the written text. According to the Nigerian director, Imasuen, it is not uncommon to start shooting a new film in the absence of a script, and with only the idea of a story to guide actors and directors.<sup>21</sup>

Kelani's efforts to translate literary texts onto screen and his practice of drawing upon established authors to write screenplays is an acknowledgement of the trend towards circumvented literacy and suggests an alternative avenue for engaging local audiences that West African authors of non-commercial creative writing may want to explore.<sup>22</sup> Performed and performative texts that use linguistic signs in print sparingly offer authors of non-commercial creative texts a wider range of opportunities for interacting with local and non-local audiences. However, connecting with larger West African audiences is not simply a question of moving from print text to film text. Authors like Sembene Ousmane in Senegal made this move decades ago with decidedly mixed results. The type of stories told as well as the aesthetics of telling the story and representing it on screen are factors that could be better exploited by authors of non-commercial narratives who desire an expanded local audience for their works.

Many authors of African high literature have claimed in the past to speak on behalf of the "people," if not directly to the people. In so doing, they illustrate what Pascale Casanova (75-81) calls the "Herder effect." As she defines it, this represents an attempt on the part of individuals from dominated societies to legitimize their literary activity and to demarcate it from

21 Imasuen, interview with the author, June 15 2005.

22 Tunde Kelani has collaborated with the famous author Akinwumi Isola on many of his films. The English-language film *Thunderbolt*, is an adaptation of Isola's Yoruba-language play, *Magun*.

the literature produced in more powerful societies. Not uncommonly, this involves constructing genealogies for their written works, leading back to earlier and contemporaneous literary forms associated with the "people." For critics like Bernard Mouralis (75), the tendency on the part of some African writers to invoke collective origin or oral sources for published creative works, in effect, effaces the agency of the author who brings his or her individuality to bear on the creative text. With the expansion of resources for the production of commercial narrative and the decline in infrastructure for distributing non-commercial narratives, it will become harder for African authors who make such claims to substantiate their position. Commercial narratives, especially in video film format reach and represent the fantasies of many more West Africans than high literature can hope to do at this point in time. But the figure of the author, who must now clearly acknowledge that she speaks for herself, and not for the people, may benefit from the growing distance between non-commercial narratives and local audiences in West Africa. Furthermore, and as suggested by Walter Benjamin (225), the fact that some creative works become less accessible to audiences may actually enhance the artistic credentials attributed to such works in an age of mechanical reproduction.

It may be premature to speak of the decline of literature in West Africa, or elsewhere on the continent, but clearly current trends give little reason to expect either increased production or reading of literature. For now, the future of mass-produced narratives in West Africa appears tied to the impetus for commercialization and the availability of technologies enabling cheap reproduction and widespread distribution. In the case of West Africa, video technology has proved to be exceptionally suitable for low-budget productions requiring minimum technical expertise, whether it is in the recording of social events such as weddings and political events,<sup>23</sup> or of serial and formulaic narratives. The commercial ethos that currently holds sway in the production of Nigerian and to a lesser extent Ghanaian video films privileges certain narrative styles such as we see deployed in the emphasis on melodrama and the adoption of serialization. Unless a more hospitable environment emerges for the production and consumption of secular non-commercial narrative in print, narratives produced locally and widely distributed in urban Ghana and Nigeria, and perhaps other parts of the West African sub-region, will exist in video cassette or video CD format, often as serialized or barely modified

imitation story. This is all the more likely since access to video film does not depend on advanced literacy, and "reading" can be undertaken as a leisure activity for the group rather than the individual. In situations such as these and where very few people have a room of their own, film rather than print narratives may be the unanticipated beneficiaries of slowly rising literacy rates and mass production of narratives.

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23 See Barber (263-264) for further information on this.

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