

SOLOMON WALIAULA
Maasai Mara University

Active audiences of Nollywood video-films: An experience with a Bukusu audience community in Chwele market of Western Kenya

ABSTRACT

This article explores the distinctively heuristic approach to Nollywood video-films used by a Bukusu-speaking audience community in Chwele Market, Western Kenya. As this audience views video-films on witchcraft in particular – which tend to be very popular – the reception process becomes remarkably dialogic. The process illuminates the audience's adaptation of the video-films into their sociocultural world. Most important is that this audience seems to not only relish, but speak back to, representations of magical power, especially as it is symbolized by snakes and women. I have argued that as they speak back to the visual images and narrative representations they not only reflect on and 'speak back' to critical aspects of their society and culture but also illuminate the cultural assumptions and ideological positions informing the iconography and social imagination of the video-films. Furthermore, this 'speaking back' takes the form of storytelling, in which the audience spontaneously generates oral narratives that sometimes diverge from and other times converge with the video-film's content. I have further argued that the reception

KEYWORDS

story-telling
dialogism
social myths
heuristic audiences
public sphere
viewing parlour

experience can be perceived as a medium of oral performance, and in this light I have explored the use of various formal characteristics of oral performance such as the use of symbolism, imagery, irony and hyperbole during a screening of Snake Girl I (Umeasor, 2008). It is significant that these formal stylistic features are appropriated from the visual and narrative form of the video-film and reconstructed in a manner that creates an exchange between, on the one hand, their screen representation and, on the other, the way in which the audience uses them in their reception stories. Also significant is the 'dialogue' at the level of imagery and symbolism between what is represented in the video-film and the one that the audiences have been socialized into. In the end, I have argued that the process of Nollywood video-film audience reception I observed at Chwele Market of Western Kenya can be read as the adaptation of the audience reception experience to fit in the frame of an oral performance.

INTRODUCTION

Nollywood video-films have been popular in Kenya for decades. They first arrived on VHS in the 1990s and have since become prevalent as VCDs, which are sold in most major markets or from street-side vendors. They are also available for rental by household consumers and for public screening in make-shift 'video-halls' in many urban centres. In this article, I am specifically concerned with the processes by which an audience in Western Kenya 'receives' Nollywood video-films. The community I worked with is located in Chwele Township, which is strategically situated along the Bungoma – Kitale road. Bungoma and Kitale are two fairly large towns, Bungoma being a commercial trading hub and Kitale being an agricultural town. The difference between the economic focus of these two towns means that both people and goods constantly travel between them. Chwele Market developed as one of the major transit centres along the way. However, Chwele Market also serves much of the hinterland, which consists of a series of slopes rising up to Mount Elgon, located on the border between Kenya and Uganda. Due to the rugged terrain of this vast area, it has been difficult for a network of all-weather roads to be constructed to serve the region. Yet, the region is extremely fertile, attracting farmers who must use donkeys to transport farm produce down the slopes of Mount Elgon to Chwele Market and carry goods back home. The proximity of the Kenya/Uganda border also means that Chwele Market attracts business from the border town of Lwakhakha.

The geographic and economic location of Chwele Market is important for at least two reasons. The first is that the people who spend most of their time at the market get to hear many stories from the people who pass through conducting business. Second, the fact that people from three diverse cultural backgrounds meet here enriches the kind of stories that are told. It is also notable that many of the people who inhabit the town by day are gone by dusk. Their cultural values and attitudes are rooted in the village landscape, but they encounter a different social reality in the urban context where they work. Urban values, as I have mentioned above, find their origins in other communities, but also from a uniquely urban experience. Many of these day-labourers work in motor-vehicle garages and Indian, Kikuyu or Somali-owned wholesale shops and restaurants. Some are unskilled, finding employment loading and unloading of goods, pushing goods and farm produce on hand-carts from one end of the market to the other and transporting people on *boda*

boda motor-cycles and bicycles. The term *boda boda* – I would like to note – was introduced to the Western region of Kenya through the border town of Busia where transportation of people and goods involved frequently crossing the national border or '*boda*'. I thus consider this market an important public sphere, an important nucleus of social exchange.

ENGAGING WITH THE RECEPTION SPACE AND ITS PATRONS

Viewing rooms are not set apart from the rest of the market infrastructure; rather they are situated between other businesses, such as retail shops, barber shops, restaurants and maize mills. Indeed, video-halls are not architecturally distinct; they are make-shift rooms, which range from 10×15 feet to 15×20 feet. Outside these make-shift rooms are notice boards listing the movies to be shown for the day. Inside are television sets and chairs. Some halls show European football matches over the weekends, but mainly during school vacations, when there is a guaranteed audience from the students in recess. In this sense, these spaces are similar to what Onookome Okome (2007: 5–6) and Babson Ajibade (2007: 3–4) have termed 'video-parlours'.

However, these viewing rooms are often ensconced in other businesses activities, such as electronics repair, cell-phone charging and barbering. In this way, audience reception is not necessarily the focal point that draws people to or around the space. One of the spaces, which has been operational since late 2002, is an approximately 12×18 feet room positioned between a barber-shop and a cereals store. At the time when I was conducting research for this article, the video-show business and the barber shop business were run by the same entrepreneur. The room where the video-films were shown was previously an eating house. The store room had been leased by some Somali businessmen who act as middle men in buying cereals, mainly maize and beans, from local farmers and then selling them to other middle-men that transport the cereals to larger towns in Western Kenya, such as Bungoma, Mumias, Kakamega and even up to Kisumu City. This store room therefore provides casual labour for loading of the cereals on trucks and Lorries before they are transported. The Chwele open market and the Bus Stage to Kitale are a few metres from this premise. Given its location, then, there are always people hanging around. They could be waiting for their turn at the barber shop, a loading job outside the store or just catching up on the goings-on at the market. The actual audience experience here is not very formal, in the sense that everyone sits down to watch a video-film. The owner charges 5 Kenyan Shillings per single Nollywood movie and 10 Shillings per western movie and, when in season, 10 Shillings per European football match. Nollywood video-film audiences are charged lower rates because they are mainly people who do not have much money to spend. Moreover, many members of the video-film audience are also the owner's barber-shop clients. They are his friends and, as he told me, 'people that he knows', which in our Bukusu sociocultural experience means people who he cannot push too much.

These latter characteristics of the space closely relate to what Onookome (2007: 5) and Ajibade (2007: 8) have termed street-side and found spaces, respectively. Onookome observes this pattern in Lagos, defining the practice as 'a "peculiar coming together" that is often effected during the evenings, just when workers of the city are heading home for the day ...' Ajibade traces the characteristic from Lagos to Douala, and significantly notes that the 'found spaces' of Lagos 'refer to free spaces in the street, in front of video-shops

where people chance-in on video showings ... provide free video-viewing for people who would not normally afford to rent or buy videos and video equipment'. Both Onookome and Ajibade observe a close link between poverty and material deprivation on the one hand and the choice to view video-films in this kind of space. However, there is a huge distinction between Onookome and Ajibade's audiences and the Chwele audience; Chwele is not a big city. It is not even a town but a small market centre. As a result, the material context is different and the space draws people from a wide swath of socio-economic backgrounds. Second, the social networks here are more readily apparent than is the case in Lagos, where, as Onookome observes, 'the constitution of the audience is fluid, and the constitution is in turn constitutive'. In the Chwele viewing parlour, the members of the audience here know each other very well, share a social life and at times even offer their unskilled labour in the same, or neighbouring, establishments. They know that they will often meet here, and even if they do not, the physical space of the market is small and in their daily business they have the chance to meet. Their congregation at this corner is not necessarily tied to the fact that they come to watch a video-film. It is part of the rhythm of their life.

I have watched Nollywood video-films here many times. I have noticed that films that depict witchcraft, magic and the supernatural are the most popular and generate the most engaging discourses, a phenomenon that has also been observed and investigated by, among others, Tobias Wendl (2007) and Birgit Meyer (2002) in the Nigeria and Ghanaian reception experience. Particularly exciting to the audience are those video-films whose underlying narratives involved elaborate ritual practices featuring old *papas*, snakes and other fetish animals and items. This article focuses on *The Snake Girl* (Umeasor, 2006), which includes many of these elements, and records a personal experience with an audience community at Chwele Market in March 2012.

THE RECEPTION EXPERIENCE

Snake Girl opens with the image of an old woman walking slowly along a winding path through a bushy terrain. She leans heavily on a walking stick. This image lasts for approximately fifteen seconds, enabling the audience to see her very clearly. She is led by a young boy. The impression created is that she is either partially or totally blind. Then there is the image of a snake slithering through the grass, apparently tracking the old woman and young boy. This produces gasps from the audience. The snake bites at the old woman's foot, and she breaks out wailing in pain and falls down clutching at her bitten appendage. The boy runs fast, raising a distress call, while the old woman is left behind, writhing in pain on the ground. At this point, and audience member interjects, 'the snake will escape, and that means she might not survive'. Meanwhile, in the film, the boy's distress call has attracted the attention of Ikemefuna, his elder brother. Ikemefuna takes control of the situation and carries his mother home. It turns out that this is not a normal snake-bite because the wound does not respond to ordinary herbal remedies. The old woman's body begins to darken in complexion. Here, an audience member interjects, 'If she survives this snake-bite, she will be immune to all other snake-bites. It seems to have been one of those snakes with superior venom'. Another voice disputes this, saying that the snake and its poison were normal but that it must have been sent by a powerful witch who wanted that old

woman dead. 'Don't you see that the snake follows the old woman to bite her, this is not normal!'

The conversation halts when the filmic narrative moves to the abode of Abakaja, the medicine-man. Ikemefuna has come here to consult with him and learns that the snake-bite was an act of vengeance from the snake-beings. It turns out that Ikemefuna has killed one of their own, the queen of the snakes. It is worth noting that, at this point, most of the audience is distracted by Abakaja's make-up and the paraphernalia littered around his place of work. Some audience members compare Abakaja's effects to those they know from local medicine-men. Many lose the main strand of the narrative and only get back to the story when they see Ikemefuna running in the bush armed with a big stick and knife. Someone asks, 'Where is he going? What happened? Did the old woman die?' At this point, I volunteer to bring them up to speed. As I tell them, the cure that is prescribed by Abakaja involves a difficult ritual quest for a medicinal herb located far off from home. Ikemefuna needs to get back before sunset and apply it on his mother's wound. Along the way, he must ensure that the medicine does not touch the ground. We all watch as Ikemefuna fights off opposition from many ferocious snakes, but just before he arrives home he collides with a beautiful girl and the impact sends the herbal medicine flying to the ground. Ikemefuna has failed in his quest and he knows that his mother will die. He is very angry with the beautiful girl, but thinking that it was a normal accident he does not have hard feelings against her. He just asks her to leave him alone. But she leaves only after introducing herself to him. She is Adaku. She has mysterious eyes and speaks in a coquettish manner, which is distracting for Ikemefuna. Male viewers, which comprise the majority of the audience, react to Adaku's physical beauty by whistling and sighing. One remarks, 'Oh! She has bathed herself! She is very clean!' In colloquial Bukusu, the phrase 'bathed herself' is idiomatic for describing extreme beauty.

Adaku keeps reappearing to Ikemefuna, particularly in the solitary moments that follow the death of his mother. He gradually opens up to Adaku because he does not realize that she is the enemy of his family. Finally, she seduces him into a relationship. This is despite the fact that he is already betrothed to a young woman named Ugomna. Ugomna and Ikemefuna's sister, Ekemna, warn Ikemefuna about Adaku, but he does not heed their advice. So the two women decide to spy on Adaku and, in the process, learn that she is actually a snake. However, Adaku catches them in the act and strikes Ekemna dead and Ugomna dumb. This is a critical point of the narrative, because in the process of dealing with the disaster, Ikemefuna goes back to Abakaja for advice, and there he learns that Abakaja knew all along about Adaku, but could not inform Ikemefuna because of a pact he had signed with the snake beings. Ikeobi, Ikemefuna's rival for Ugomna, becomes involved and is very supportive of Ikemefuna. An all-out war breaks out between the snake-beings and human beings, in which Adaku is finally killed by Ikemefuna's younger brother.

During the screening, the audience develops a number of stories that ran counter to the narrative trajectory of the video-film. The video-hall becomes a space of competing narratives about snakes and witchcraft. At the very beginning of the video, when the image of the snake and the old woman appears, one viewer – a day-labourer – exclaims, 'That snake belongs to her, just look at her, she has the looks of a witch'. Someone else quips from the back of the hall, 'But that snake doesn't look like a magical snake, those have decorative

rings around the neck'. The debate is cut short when the snake bites the old woman, but the audience does not refrain from engaging in a debate about the domestication of snakes for witchcraft purposes. One viewer refers to the story of Waswa we Makotelo, a renowned medicine-man allegedly from Mabanga village, near Bungoma town. At the reference, the names of other medicine-men are also mentioned, such as Tanyaka of Malikisi, a border town between Kenya and Uganda, and Teresia Ngwa Chonge of Mount Elgon. I note the stories that are told about these medicine-men.

Waswa is claimed to have been omnipresent. It was believed that darkness gave him the power to float to wherever he wanted to go. Members of the audience reflect on how as young children they were warned to be quiet, lest Waswa we Makotelo were to overhear them, pick them up and devour them. Tanyaka is said to have received some of his magical charms from across the border in Uganda, charms that his Kenyan counterparts would not know how to counter. Teresia Ngwa Chonge is famed to have had only one breast. All of this is established while the video-film is running, the story unfolding. Even though many audience members lose track of the narrative, they are not surprised when Adaku starts shape-shifting into her snake form. Many claim that they knew she was a snake, that a girl as beautiful and as charming as Adaku cannot be an ordinary woman, but must be an evil trap. The audience delves into the merits and demerits of marrying a beautiful woman, and comes to a general agreement that extreme feminine beauty and charm are synonymous with evil and destruction.

Some members of the audience do not identify with the protagonist, Ikemefuna, in his struggle with the snakes. Some viewers express awe and admiration about the magical qualities of the snakes, even though, in the logic of the video-film narrative, the snakes are villains. As a researcher, this is striking, but as a native of the region I also understand the complex symbolic significance of snakes in this community. I have heard stories of big snakes that babysit infants when the mothers are out working on the farm. I know that it is taboo to kill a snake that you find in your house; you only chase it away. I have heard of talisman snakes that play the role of guardians of family wealth and health, and are inherited from father to daughter and mother to son from one generation to the next. I was not surprised when members of the audience began telling stories about the significance of snakes.

For example, one viewer tells the story of a young man who killed a large snake that had strayed into his home around noon one day. Later in the afternoon, one of the villagers, an old man named Wanjala, came to his home announcing that one of his goats was missing and that he was wondering whether it may have strayed into their home. The young people in the home said they had not seen it. Later in the evening, Wanjala came back, and this time found their parents at home. From the look in Wanjala's eyes, their father knew what had happened. He reiterated that they had not seen the goat, but that he would talk to his children at length and get back to Wanjala if he learned anything useful. As soon as Wanjala left, the father called a family meeting and asked if anyone had seen a big snake in their home, or worse, killed it. The young man admitted to having killed the snake. Alarmed, the father demanded to know where he had dumped the dead body. It turned out that the boy had thrown it in the pit latrine. The father was relieved to hear this. He knew Wanjala was actually looking for a snake, not a goat. Had Wanjala found the dead body of his snake, the boy would die. But since he had not, it would be Wanjala to die. Shortly after, Wanjala did die. This

story is told, and listened to by many audience members, within the lapse of time when, in the video film narrative, the relationship between Adaku and Ikemefuna is developing and Ikeobi begins stalking Ugomna to steal her from Ikemefuna.

When Adaku begins shape-shifting into her snake form, the audience returns to the video film narrative. There is a scene in which Ekemna stalks Adaku deep into the bush, in order to witness the change from human to snake form, during which one audience member remarks that it would be easy for Ekemna to watch unnoticed because Adaku would not look back when she arrived at the point where the shape-shifting would take place. 'She is like an initiate on his ritual to and back from the river, you don't look back, no matter what happens, no matter what you hear', the man informs the rest of the audience. At that point, Adaku looks back over her shoulder and the informant is outraged, arguing that the story was not being told properly. 'Haven't you noticed that when a night-runner is fleeing from pursuit, he doesn't look back, and even if you catch him, he doesn't talk, however much you torture him?' he asks the room. This generates a debate about 'night-runners' that lasts for some minutes. Interestingly, what emerged as a criticism of the film had not been pursued. Instead, it has acted as a trigger for oral performance. During the debate, two narratives are generated about the ritual habits of medicine-men. One viewer reports that, 'Bukusu medicine-men do not use enclosed spaces as toilets. They do it in the bush, because they believe that pit latrines and/or flush toilets weaken their power'. Another tells the story of his late step-grandmother, whom he suspects of being a witch. 'Every morning she would walk from her hut to my house to pull off some grass from one corner [of the thatched roof], allegedly to use to light her morning fire', he says. His point is that she avoided using grass from her own hut because it could weaken her magical charms.

Drawing connections between the video-film narrative and their own lives occurs at many other moments during the screening. For example, when Adaku uses her beauty and charm to captivate Ikemefuna, one man refers to a local man named Fred, who is married to a woman from Uganda. Apparently, three other members of the audience know Fred and his wife. They have worked with him at the wholesale shops in Chwele Market. According to them, Fred never kept a job for long and was, at that very point in time, looking for work. According to them, however, Fred was doomed as long as he was with his Ugandan wife. Nothing would go right for him. He had worked in all the major wholesale shops and, for some inexplicable reason, always left after a short stint. It was said that Fred's wife oppressed him using her physical beauty and magical charms that came from Uganda. One man claims to have actually advised Fred how to relate with his wife, but Fred politely told the man that he believed his wife was more beautiful than he deserved and that if he were to be tough on her, she would surely leave him for another man. The relationship between Fred and his wife then becomes a source of comedy for the audience. It is argued that Fred sleeps on the floor while the wife sleeps on the bed – because she does not consider him clean enough to sleep in the same bed with her. Some claim that his conjugal rights are rarely met, and when they are, he pays for it.

The denouement of *Snake Girl I* also generates debate amongst the audience in Chwele Market. In the film, Abakaja the medicine-man confesses to Ikemefuna that he had known all along about Adaku and her mission and had agreed not to give up her identity. I ask a question, directed to no one

in particular, whether this happens in real life and whether it is ethical or not. This starts a discussion in which two men who had been dominating the discussion take centre stage. One tells the story of an old man who was also a well-known herbalist and had caused the deaths of many people. Everyone knew that he was a killer but none dared to confront him. When he was about to die he confessed to every evil deed he had committed. Without this confession, the herbalist argued, the ancestors would not accept him. The other outspoken man argued that the ending of the video-film was not believable. According to him, Adaku the snake girl would not have been killed that easily by a young boy. Her magical powers were such that she could only die after an epic battle involving a strong man. The open battle portrayed in the video-film, pitting human beings and snakes, is also questioned. It is argued that snakes can only work in league with human beings against other human beings. One man argues that in the Bukusu tradition, no snake-bite is accidental. There is always an evil person behind it who uses the snake to strike his or her victim. This is why the first recommended line of action after a snake-bite is to find the snake and kill it. It is believed that this disconnects its link with the human force behind it.

This discussion forms a major critique of the film. The sociocultural experiences of the audience, particularly their way of reading cultural symbols, seem to have rendered the video-film narrative false. The experience appears to be pleasurable for the audience, but not because the video-film conforms to their world-view. Rather, the film is pleasurable primarily due to its capacity for generating another line of storytelling and subjects for debate. Moreover, these discourses are not confined to the time and space of the screening. After the film ended, and as the viewers spilled out of the video-hall, the debates and stories continued.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Rethinking the video-film reception experience as an oral performance brings a significant new dimension to the understanding of Nollywood's transnationalism. In this section, I examine the literary qualities of the oral performances as it is constituted by context, the performers and the texts they generate. The physical location of the viewing-room in question is comparable to an informal performance stage, a stage that no one deliberately marks out but that gradually develops because of a sort of marriage of convenience. I have noted that most of the people who come here are have been coming here for some time, and thus their membership in the audience community is a subset of a bigger identity formation. This audience has more in common than their apparent desire to watch Nollywood video-films and their relationship with a linguistic, ethnic or national community. The commonalities are evident from the fact that the sociocultural world of the stories they tell and even some of the individual characters mentioned are known to most of them. It is thus possible to argue that this is a space that has some elements of the carnival, particularly the subversion of authority, which in this case figuratively refers to the hierarchical relationship between the video-film and its audience. In this subverted context suppressed tensions and anxieties are allowed expression.

In the stories that audience members tell, we note a number of specific tensions and anxieties. The first derives from differences in age and history. Through one audience member's reactions, we see the kind of misunderstanding that may arise in an extended family system where a

step-grandmother and her grandson live as neighbours. The grandson describes his step-grandmother's use of *his* thatched roof to light *her* fire as witchcraft, but underlying this assertion is his desire at that particular point in time (the grandmother is long since dead) to denigrate and break out of the communal rhythm of life, which is difficult because he lives in a physical and sociocultural space that is dominantly communal. Second, it is possible for the two to clash because they belong to different generations and value systems. His late step-grandmother, it seems, was acting according to a time that predates the match, when dry thatch from the roof was used to reignite a hearth fire, where a few live coals were buried overnight. The roofs were seasonally repaired, especially just before the start of the rains; it was part of the rhythm of life. She may have thus been totally unaware that whatever she was doing was wrong.

We also have the tensions of married life and the politics of gender. The Chwele audience exhibits reverence for patriarchal depictions of family and perceive examples such as Fred as crossers of normative boundaries. Perceived in this light, the sociocultural space created around the reception experience at Chwele Market is comparable to Brian Larkin's (1997: 410–13) description of the reception of Indian films among Hausa audiences in northern Nigeria. Larkin describes popular, printed Hausa-language love stories – or Soyayya texts – as stories that might be read as carnivalesque performances of the reception context of Indian films, and as space where the inversion of authority that pervades the filmic reception experience is then textually performed. The Chwele Market viewing space produces similar carnivalesque productions, which are rendered orally rather than in print. In both cases, the productions are possible because they mobilize a fictional world. I argue that the centre of gravity for this fictional world is the audience reception experience. To this extent, the viewing space becomes the equivalent of a medium of literary production. Importantly, though, as it has also been observed by Larkin, the fictional world is a representation of the tensions and anxieties of the real world.

A closer engagement with the narratives performed here, in the context of audience reception, reveals a complex network of intertextuality, which Johannes Fabian (1997: 22) has termed a social reference. Specific narrative tensions, images and symbols of the video-film are understood in their relationship not only with the world of the film, but in relationship with Bukusu folklore, popular belief, stereotypes and prejudices – a process similar to that observed by Osakue Stevenson Omoera (2009: 196) – and the life experiences of discrete audience members. This is again similar to the Hausa Soyayya publications, which Larkin describes as largely based on the real-life experiences of their writers. I consider all these texts, which coalesced through reception, as neither fact nor fiction but, in the words of Larkin (1997: 409), 'an imaginative investment of viewers in a context where narrative becomes a mode of social inquiry'.

I have understood the audience's preference for specific narrative types revolving around witchcraft and magic as evidence that, as is the case with Larkin's Hausa viewers of Indian films, this audience is attracted and in a sense provoked by a visualization and narrative reconstruction of aspects of social reality that are, as Larkin notes, controversial in daily life. It seems to me that, for the Bukusu audience, the video films' use of camera tricks and visual effects to construct a magical world, which is otherwise only known through myths, rumours and hearsay, affords the audience a 'voyeurist' experience. It

plays on people's anxieties and fears, which, in Wendl's (2007: 3) view, draws on prevailing understandings of what he terms 'evil', but which Omoera (2009: 196) defines as the mixing of shock and desire to capture the audience in a constant game of showmanship. Nevertheless, both Wendl and Omoera suggest that the portrait of witchcraft and magic is comparable to horror, and has the overall effect of shocking and outraging the audience, which is a perspective not supported by my experience with the Chwele Market audience community.

One could argue that the video-film narrative is informed by a Christian perspective, which is particularly legitimated by the video-film's final scenes, in which a young boy kills Adaku the snake girl using a sling, echoing the David and Goliath contest in Biblical mythology. It is part of the social imagination of Nollywood, and the Ghanaian video-films that Meyer (2002: 67–87) has studied, to use a Pentecostal mode of representation that addresses a Pentecostal public culture. The fact that the Chwele Market audience questions the Pentecostal-influenced narrative and structure of *Snake Girl I* problematizes Meyer's homogenization of audience reception. The audience finds the portrait of Adaku the snake to be 'false'. They argue that the story presents her as much stronger than an ordinary human being and that the only person who stands a chance of beating her is Abakaja. However, considering the fact that Adaku had bullied Abakaja the medicine-man into signing a pact of secrecy, and has gone ahead to kill Ikemefuna's mother, wreck his engagement to Ugomna, kill his sister and strike Ugomna dumb, she had been presented as invincible. Whoever would kill her, viewers argued, would be a real hero. One viewer suggested that Ikemefuna was the man better placed to kill Adaku, but because Adaku used her feminine charm to blindfold him, he could not do it. Incidentally, this is part of the Pentecostal perspective that invokes the motif of the beautiful but evil temptress – a Delilah figure – who blindfolds and weakens a man of God using her charm.

I have understood the Chwele Market audience's apparent 'resistance' to some of the Pentecostal representations, such as the image of the snake, as partly due to the parallel representation(s) of the snake in their folk beliefs. Considering that this is an audience that straddles African traditional religion and Christianity, their social reality is a compromise of the two. For instance, one of the dominant Bukusu myths involving a snake, which is preserved in a popular story, suggests that there was once a giant snake that lived in place called *Mwiala*, in the southern part of Bukusuland. It devoured goats, sheep and even children, but its sheer size, power and ferocity were such that nobody dared challenge it. One day, it captured and devoured Mango's son. Mango was so enraged that he decided to challenge the snake to a fight and kill it. He sharpened his knife and spear and went to hide inside the snake's cave in the afternoon, waiting for its arrival late in the evening. When the snake arrived, it sensed a human presence, but could not locate it. It went round and round the outside of the cave surveying, and having seen no human being decided to enter its abode. Once it had rested its head on a raised pedestal inside the cave, Mango chopped it off with a sharp spear. The head jumped out of the cave and bit a tree, which dried up on the spot. The torso writhed and coiled in pain, working its way out of the cave, and wound round and round till it finally lay motionless. Mango was celebrated as a hero, and as part of feting him, he was circumcised. The imagery of the ritual, which was borrowed from the neighbouring Saboat ethnic community, was meant to mirror the imagery of Mango's victory. It is believed that Mango's ordeal marks the adoption of male circumcision as a rite of passage. This is a myth that perceives

masculinity as closely associated with serpentine power and mystery. The snake is thus in some contexts man's alter ego. It [the snake] is necessary for him to define himself and perform his identity.

The aesthetic dimension of this oral performance rendered in the context of the audience reception experience is important. We have observed that the stories told here do not necessarily represent truth or myth; rather their poetic dimensions are the most significant part of the oral performance. Indeed, not every member of the audience participates in equal measure. In my experience only two members of the audience seemed to dominate the show. They commanded attention in very different ways. Mulongo, one of the two, is blessed with a rich falsetto voice and has a rather slow rhythm of speech; he brings out his words slowly. I learnt that he is ordinarily a very humorous individual. He has received the very basic education and his highest academic qualifications are the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE). A porter in one of the wholesale shops at the Market, he is a very popular figure not just in the audience reception space but in the market in general. When doing research for this article he was a married man with one child. It is Mulongo who recounts his conflict with a step-grandmother and places it at the centre of his oral performance. The other dominant member of the audience was David. David is an on and off public service vehicle driver. He is also an on and off motor-mechanic. Unlike Mulongo, David has a deep and loud voice, and sometimes even 'overlaps' others when they are talking. His formal academic qualifications are slightly higher than Mulongo's. At the time of research for this article, he too was a married man with two children. He is the one who tells the story of Wanjala the medicine-man. During the reception experience, he was in the company of a younger brother.

The two are outstanding oral artists who share the 'stage' with the primary medium – the video-film. These artists could be perceived in the light of the concept of video narration explored by Mathias Krings' (2010) and Dominic Dipio (2008) in the Tanzanian and Ugandan reception experiences, respectively. Both scholars recognize the oral poetics that the translators bring into their practice. Krings argues as follows:

These video narrators do far more than simply translate or recreate pre-existing filmic texts in a different language or medium. Their craft consists in the creation of new texts, texts that speak to both the foreign film and its new and unforeseen local context.

(2010)

Both the Tanzanian and the Ugandan video narration experiences demonstrate an attempt by individuals to draw attention to themselves in a context that is otherwise structured to subordinate them as passive consumers of a complete and independent work of art, the video-film. However, I consider the fluidity of the oral performance sessions that characterize the Chwele Market audience reception as perhaps more profound at the level of individual oral artistry since those who dominate the sessions do so in fluid conditions and in competition with many forces that include their own desire and curiosity to follow the story, other members of the audience interested in following the story as it unfolds and those who may also want to talk and catch the attention of others. Those who eventually stand out, such as Mulongo and David in my experience with the Chwele community, cannot be underestimated. They are accomplished oral artists in their immediate contexts.

It would be a mistake, however, to claim that these views are monolithic. The Chwele Market's physical and sociocultural contexts are definitely larger than this article's reading of them through stories performed during the reception experience. Furthermore, the fact that some members of the audience dominated the storytelling process reveals that reception is an uneven process. The men who were most vocal worked in trades that required them to meet and talk with many people of different kinds. This influenced their social life and, in a sense, their video-film audience personas. They were more confident interpreters, even though they appeared foolish in some instances. Further research might investigate the degree to which confident speakers emerge as media within a medium. The audience reception experience seems to revolve around them just as much as it did around the screen.

REFERENCES

- Ajibade, Babson (2007), 'From Lagos to Douala: The video film and its spaces of seeing', *Post Colonial Text*, 3: 2. [Postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/viewFile/524/418](http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/viewFile/524/418)
- Arjun, Appadurai (1996), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dipio Dominica (2008), 'Ugandan viewership of Nigerian movies', in Foloke Ogunleye (ed.), *Africa through the Eye of the Video Camera*, Manzini: Swaziland Academic pp. 57–81.
- Fabian, J. (1997), 'Popular cultures in Africa: Findings and conjectures', in Karin Barber (ed.), *African Popular Culture*, Oxford: James Currey, pp. 18–28.
- Krings, Mathias (2010), 'Turning rice into Pilau: The art of video narration in Tanzania', Working Papers, no. 115, Institute of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, Germany.
- Kumwenda, Grace (2007), 'The portrayal of witchcraft, occults and magic in popular Nigerian video films', Masters' Thesis, Johannesburg: Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Larkin, Brian (1997), 'Indian films and Nigerian lovers: Media and the creation of parallel modernities', *Africa*, 67: 3, pp. 406–39.
- Meyer, Birgit (2002), 'Pentecostalism, prosperity and popular cinema in Ghana', *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 3: 1, pp. 67–87
- Onookome, Okome (2007), 'Nollywood: Spectatorship, audience and the sites of consumption', *Postcolonial Text*, 3: 2, postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/viewArticle/763.
- Omoera, Osakue Stevenson (2009), 'Video film and African social reality: A consideration of Nigeria-Ghana bloc of West Africa', *Journal of Human Ecology*, 25: 3, pp. 193–99.
- Umeasor, Emeka (2006), *The Snake Girl*, Udumota, Lagos: Frontmaster International.
- Wendl, Tobias (2007), 'Wicked villagers and the mysteries of reproduction: An exploration of horror movies from Ghana and Nigeria', *Post Colonial Text*, 3: 2, <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/529/420>.

SUGGESTED CITATION

- Waliaula, S. (2014), 'Active audiences of Nollywood video-films: An experience with a Bukusu audience community in Chwele market of Western Kenya', *Journal of African Cinemas* 6: 1, pp. 71–83, doi: 10.1386/jac.6.1.71_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Solomon Waliaula was born in the Western region of Kenya among the Bukusu speaking community of the larger Luhya ethnic group. He went to Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya, for his undergraduate degree in Education Arts, with a bias on Linguistics and Literature. He did his Masters' Degree in Literature in the same university and wrote his dissertation on the literary patterns of East African drama. His doctoral research was on the perceived oral performance characteristics of radio soccer commentary in Kenya. His current research interests and publication portfolio is in the area of football cultures, and particularly on the confluence between electronic media cultures and the oral performance tradition in contemporary East Africa.

Contact: Maasai Mara University, School of Arts and Social Sciences, P. O. Box 861-20500, Narok, Kenya.

E-mail: solomonwaliaula@gmail.com

Solomon Waliaula has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.



intellect

www.intellectbooks.com

publishers
of original
thinking

Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research

ISSN 17519411 | Online ISSN 1751942X
3 issues per volume | Volume 6, 2013

The emergence of satellite TV, the internet and digital technology have dramatically changed the way audiences receive information and interact with the media. The sudden success of Al-Jazeera and other Arab broadcasters have altered the way the Arab world narrates itself and reports news from the region to the rest of the world. The journal aims to lead the debate about these emerging rapid changes in media and society in Arab and Muslim parts of the world.

The *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* is a refereed academic publication dedicated to the study of communication, culture and society in the Arab and Muslim world. It aims to lead the debate about the rapid changes in media and society in that part of the world. This journal is also interested in diasporic media like satellite TV, radio and new media especially in Europe and North America. The journal serves a large international community of academics, researchers, students, journalists, policy makers and other members of the public in the West as well as the Arab and Muslim countries.



Editor

Noureddine Miladi
Qatar University
noureddine.miladi@qu.edu.qa