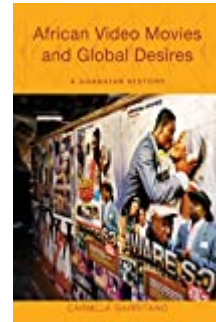


**Carmela Garritano.** *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013. xii + 246 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89680-286-5.



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## New Ghanaian Influences on Film

Carmela Garritano's *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* opens by making a distinction between film and video. While film has failed to take root in Africa due to expensive technology, international hegemony, and dilapidated movie theaters, video, Garritano says, "represents the most important and exciting development in African cultural production in recent history" (p. 1). According to Garritano, "regional cultural economies in Africa have resisted assimilation into dominant economies and given expression to local voices, concerns, and desires" (p. 155). This book examines these expressions in the context of Ghana's history of film and video, with particular attention given to the representation of neoliberal principles in contemporary video movies.

The book begins in the earliest memories of cinema in Ghana when exhibitors would tour villages with pirated films—those stolen or smuggled through the Takoradi port. Garritano references the work of Ghanaian journalist Nanabanyin Dadson in one such recounting of a 1920s exhibitor named Ata Joe: "When he arrived

at a village, he and one assistant would hire a courtyard of a house, set up an electricity generator and projector and show a number of films for a few days. The films were mainly American cowboy, war and Charlie Chaplin types" (p. 28).[1] Soon the British colonial authority felt the need to impose restrictions on what it felt should and should not be seen by Ghanaian audiences: "the Colonial Office Films Committee presented a report to the Conference of Colonial Governors (1930) that highlighted the crucial need to censor films exhibited in the colonies 'as the display of unsuitable films is a very real danger to 'primitive communities' in Africa" (p. 28).[2] A censorship panel was formed but given little to no power to wield its influence. As Garritano explains, "Newspaper advertisements from the period indicate that commercial cinemas continued to feature a range of Hollywood films. Commercial exhibitors had little motivation for submitting their films to be censored, and the censorship panel had no power to prohibit exhibitors or distributors from making Hollywood films available to audiences" (p. 29). Garritano qualifies

this narrative by stating that the cinematic experience in Ghana has existed as a sort of form of dissent—at the very least, it offered Ghanaian audiences counternarratives to those imposed by British colonial hegemony.

This is shown clearly in a detailed unpacking of one of the earliest Ghanaian films, *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952). While it was made by the state-funded Colonial Film Unit under a British director, it was co-written with one of his Ghanaian trainees and told an allegorical story that expressed the pathos of living in a still colonized, modernizing nation. Garritano explains that the film, organized around the motif of the journey, replays the colonial opposition between tradition and modernity. Kumasenu, the protagonist, migrates from the traditional village to the city, where the film's voice-over narration explains, "Everything is new," and his journey to modernity allegorizes Ghana's evolution from primitive tradition to modern nationhood (p. 24). In referencing historian Timothy Mitchell's idea of the space time of European modernity, Garritano explains the deeper meanings of these two locations: the African village, rendered through an ethnographic gaze, signifies the place of timelessness, in relation to which the temporal break of modernity can be marked out. The coastal city of Accra, ushered into modernity by British imperialism, stands as the imminent outcome of Africa's evolution (p. 34).<sup>[3]</sup> The Colonial Film Unit eventually transitioned into the Gold Coast Film Unit and after independence became the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC). Throughout its various incarnations, the organization made many state-sponsored films that found larger audiences abroad than at home, and its efforts became sequestered among Ghana's elite. In the 1990s as the world embraced neoliberal reforms in the developing world, Ghana was asked by the IMF to divest from nonessential state-owned corporations and promptly sold 51 percent of its shares in the GFIC to a Malaysian consortium. Garritano shows that the divestiture of the GFIC and the migration of trained film- and videomakers affiliated with official cultural institutions into the burgeoning commercial video industry muddled the lines that in the industry's earliest years distinguished professional from amateur productions, filmmakers from videomakers, and state-sponsored from commercial movies (p. 93).

This context sets the stage for the most engaging discourse in the book, which compares the sleek, dramatic movies of director Shirley Frimpong-Manso that take place among the Ghanaian elite, with the new wave of "Sakawa" movies which follow young men engaged

in occult activities in the pursuit of wealth. Garritano argues that the destruction of Ghana's existing film industry after the divestiture of the GFIC opened the door to the huge wave of video movies, both due to the technology, expenses, and the popularity of Nollywood (Nigerian) video movies in Ghana. In that wave, the narratives of neoliberalism are reflected in both aspirational and antagonistic ways.

Describing the work of director Frimpong-Manso, Garritano claims that the movies conceal the economic advantages these characters enjoy and embody, they participate in disseminating neoliberal governmentalities. The narratives build entire fantasy worlds around personal choices made and realized (p. 181). In one such fantasy world, the gorgeous women, each wearing a chic, color-coordinated ensemble, each made-up flawlessly, each with a slim and stylish cell phone, model the clothes, accessories, and entertainments that the mall offers. This scene functions as a metonym for the aesthetics of superfluity that all of Frimpong-Manso's movies deploy impeccably. Like the mall, these films work like synthetic spacetimes, provoking desire not only for the goods on display, but for the characters' lifestyles. The spectator's pleasure derives from leaving the banality of the everyday and vicariously fashioning a new, modern self through consumption (p. 177).<sup>[4]</sup> However, Garritano points out that while this expression of femininity is couched as modernity and women's liberation, such a feminism is extremely limited in its reach and articulation, available only to the global elite, and that, additionally, it fails to acknowledge the commodification of women's bodies and the stringent regime of beauty standards it participates in legitimizing (p. 181). The counterpoint to this representation of neoliberal values comes in the form of Sakawa movies. Inasmuch as Sakawa films also politicize women's bodies, one such film's female character appears with sores and cuts on her arms and legs, and she does not speak or resist. On her hands and knees, she emits animal groans and vomits money. Her body, neither alive nor dead, has been transformed into a money-producing apparatus. In this grotesque allegory of capitalism, the movie enacts the extraction of wealth from human life (p. 189).

Sakawa is a local idiom meaning Internet fraud, but it is understood to be deeply connected to occult rituals. As Garritano explains, young men who engage in sakawa are said to employ spiritual assistance, a phrase that describes various occult activities, including visiting shrines and performing the rituals demanded by the shrine priest (p. 184). She goes on to show that

the movies aim to represent the materiality denied by Frimpong-Manso's shiny surfaces and commodity aesthetics. They express what those movies hide: the profound ambivalence that results from the collision of dire poverty and excessive consumption as experienced virtually through the global and local media images and observed, firsthand, in the pockets of prosperity and displays of commodities, like those found at the Accra Mall, that dot the urban landscape of the postcolonial city. Each movie devotes significant time to narrating the extreme economic hardships that drive young men to *sakawa* (p. 186). She shows that while the movies of Frimpong-Manso ignore the gap between lack and plenty, in *Sakawa* movies, the gap is not obscured but brought into the narrative, described and criticized; it is the reason young men take up corrupt and immoral lifestyles. *Sakawa* movies offer a critique of the consumer desires provoked by Frimpong-Manso's movies. Through the idioms of witchcraft and magic, they reveal the uncanny underside of capitalism (p. 194.)

In the end Garritano contextualizes this paradigm within the structure of the work of philosopher Achille Mbembe. "Video movies," Garritano says, "activate an imaginary of consumption," providing audiences with opportunities to virtually attain desired goods and status in an economy of chronic scarcity, "an economy where desired goods are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy, but to which one will never have material access." It is the condition of impossibility that stimulates the imagination and new modes of self-formation through consumption, Mbembe argues, and,

it seems that it is scarcity, too, that makes the consumer fantasies played out in many video movies appealing (p. 198). [5] She finally claims that whether or not these films have a role to play as forms of dissent, they are crucial to the way people engage with and understand the schisms of modernity in the developing world. With the help of Mbembe again, she states that, "neither resisting nor assimilating to regimes of domination, video movies and other popular modes of expression are among the myriad ways ordinary people guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly" (p. 190). [6]

#### Notes

[1]. Quoting Nanabanyin Dadson, "Ghana Goes to Watch 'Cine,'" *Mirror*, July 29, 1995, 11.

[2]. Quoting Rosaleen Smyth, "The Development of British Colonial Film Policy 1927-1939, with Special Reference to East and Central Africa," *Journal of African History* 20, no. 3 (1979): 437.

[3]. Quoting Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *The Question of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16.

[4]. Quoting Achille Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Superfluity," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 401.

[5]. Quoting Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 271.

[6]. Quoting Achille Mbembe, *On The Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), 128.

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