

# ***Black Panther* as Afro-complementary Cinematic Intervention: Lessons for Africa South of the Sahara Movie Industries**

by

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## **Introduction**

*Black Panther* is the first mega-budget fictional superhero movie with a predominantly black cast, causing it to fill a lacuna in international cinema—the absence or stereotyped portrayal of Africans and their continent in international cinema. The eighteenth movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe was released on February 16, 2018, “as the entertainment industry is wrestling with its toxic treatment of women and persons of colour” Smith (2018) and it was regarded as “overdue” Bishop (2018).

*Black Panther* portrays elements of a variety of deep African heroic cultures, climaxing with the Afro-complementary gesture of T’Challa sharing the resources and technology of Wakanda with the rest of the world. The action symbolises healthy global interaction without undermining national and continental sovereignty and individuality. This is a useful lesson and guide in creating content for Nollywood. Scriptwriters may explore such storylines that tell of global inter-connectedness and developmental synergies, emphasizing Africa’s uniqueness. This differs from the current African filmmaking trend of looking within the same local context and producing very similar movies, causing its output to lack originality and adequate ability to make commensurate revenue.

With regards to production, Marvel Studios employed a very wide range of experts to put the movie together. The diversity in the production teams did not alter the crux of the movie; rather, it allowed the story to be adequately told while meeting global filmmaking standards. To position itself as a source of top-notch Afro-complementary content, Nollywood should be complementary in its production with expertise and skills as key determinants in constituting production teams.

The African movie industry struggles to push its content to the global stage whether or not they meet globally accepted standards and conventions. Interestingly, Nollywood ranks second globally in terms of annual production, following India's Bollywood (UNESCO, 2013). Despite the success of Nollywood within the African film industry, it has not enjoyed adequate global recognition and key players have found it difficult to penetrate the global scene. Hence, this study aims at drawing lessons from the Afro-complementary content and production of Marvel's *Black Panther*.

## Background

The development of African cinema south of the Sahara, like most other continental identities, can be traced to the region's colonial history. The continent's cinema in the colonial era was absolutely represented by Western filmmakers while local film production was mostly repressed, especially in French colonies by the Laval Decree in the mid-twentieth century. The Laval Decree of 1934 was used to prohibit Africans from making movies in French African colonies without prior authorization. Even films made by non-Africans were scrutinized, and when found to be anti-colonial, such films were banned (Barlet, 2012). Africa's cinematic representation in this era was used to "reinforce the Western vision of a dark continent." (Murphy, 2000: 239) Africa was projected as a wild and savage place with exotic endowments but without history. Movies produced at that time include *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1931) and *The African Queen* (1951).

The 1960s saw a wave of decolonization in Africa thus igniting a movement to propagate a new gospel of Africa through the rise of indigenous African filmmakers. Their aim was not just to project indigenous perspectives of Africa but to erase existing dark perceptions by creating restorative pictures and language entrenched in their knowledge of African peoples and cultures and not its past or colonial history. (Prabhu, 2014)

One of the earliest African filmmakers whose works became popular was Senegalese author Ousmane Sembene. Largely considered the father of African cinema, Ousmane Sembene started his cinematic career in the 1960s. He categorically emphasized that Europe was not his reference. (Maya, 2005) Sembene whose filmmaking career started after Senegal's independence from France argued that literature in colonial languages had little impact on his fellow Africans. He presented himself as the "mouth and ears of his people" and used his movies to chronicle the unequal distribution of wealth and power in postcolonial Africa and the lives of its dispossessed populations. His works put Senegalese cinema in the spotlight as a pioneer in indigenous filmmaking in Africa.

Sembene's position was amplified at the 1975 meeting of the Federation of African Filmmakers in Algiers where a commitment was made to radically deviate from previous cinematic representations of Africa: "Not only should African films represent Africa from an African point of view, but they should also reject commercial, Western film codes" (Murphy, 2000: 240). Murphy asserts that while the African film industry has not been unified in this radical position, traits of it however remain strong in the continent's cinematic landscape.

## **Afrocentricity in Sub-Saharan Africa's Contemporary Cinema**

Africa south of the Sahara was one of the last in the world to produce its own movies. It launched with a strong desire to tell the true African tale rather than the singular perspective presented during the pre-1960s colonial era. (Bakari & Mbye, 1996; Murphy, 2010). The stereotyped representation of Africa in global media precipitated extensive research efforts for decades (Achebe, 1977; Potts, 1979; Asante, 1991; Jarosz, 1992; Biney, 1997; Michira, 2002; Prabhu, 2014; Ponican 2015) and has been described as an uncritical adoption of “centuries old colonial representation of Africa as a helpless, war-torn, poverty-stricken and corruption infested continent despite recent political and economic growth” on the continent. (Oguh, 2015: 4) As a result, there has been a dialectic in the nature of African cinema as it opposed Westernisation and promoted African cultures. On the global scene, Smith (2018) pointed out the toxic treatment of women and persons of colour. These notions of absence and toxic treatment of Africans in broader global contexts have been on the fore of the African representation discourse for decades. Again, on the global cinematic landscape, Bishop (2018) noted that there is a lack of adequate African points of view or representation. Films produced in Africa seem to serve audiences mostly within the continent. This perhaps results in non-penetration of African movies to the global market. There is a lacuna as Africans now film Africa mostly for Africans. Hence, the crusade to correct the crude notions of Africa has really not gone beyond the continent. These trends constitute what Afrocentric philosophers have always described as decentering Africa from its own narrative. (Asante, 2017)

Afrocentric philosophers have tried to work towards the theory of Afrocentricity by putting Africa at the fore of international discourse. (Asante, 1991; 2017; Mazama, 2001; Reviere, 2001) The theory moves to systematically displace foreign paradigms and consciously replace them with African ones, whether or not they are in line with globally accepted tradition, especially in research. Its presentation however causes Afrocentric theory to appear as a protest against globally acclaimed conventions without necessarily providing political, social and economic structures that drive the philosophy (Omojola, 2008).

This Afrocentricity concept may be used to describe the history and current production and operational patterns of African movie industries south of the Sahara. The 1975 Algiers filmmakers' charter is Afrocentric and the terrain has largely remained to date. Although Murphy (2000: 241) argues that African cinema is trapped in some level of inauthenticity as “authentic” African cinema by Afrocentric or “Third Cinema” standards “must not only exclude all things European or Western, but must also set itself up in opposition to them.” Murphy's argument is that the idea of a cinema in the first place is Western as well as the technology and many times western cultures still find their ways into the African cinema.

Of particular interest to this study is thus the limitation that this Afrocentric poise places on African cinema south of the Sahara. Only few African movies south of the Sahara make it to the global scene and even fewer get international nominations and awards. The low level of acceptance and recognition of African movies also causes the industry's revenue to be low. Senegalese cinema has a place in history for launching African cinema to the world but in contemporary times it has not been able to compete favourably on the global stage. The cinema industry of Burkina Faso is also very significant especially because of the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) that it hosts bi-annually. Films produced locally in Burkina Faso have some international acceptance, especially in parts of French-speaking Europe. Many films in this category are however more popular in academic spheres because of the regular features in the African studies discipline. Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa are currently leading the region's cinema industry in terms of production volume and revenue but still do not enjoy the level of acceptability that Hollywood enjoys given the difference in production and perhaps content.

The identification of this gap suggests the need to inter-weave and complement existing cinematic structures. This essentially means that a synergy should be achieved on the global cinematic landscape. This submission may be viewed in the light of complementarity or "afrocomplementarism" as Omojola (2010, p. 176) put it, rather than Afrocentricity. The philosophy of Afrocentricity is built upon the notion that Africa is often decentred from its own narrative; thus, moves to systematically displace foreign paradigms and consciously replace them with African ones whether or not they are in line with the principles of the Western research tradition. (Asante, 1991; 2017; Mazama, 2001; Reviere, 2001).

The epistemology of Afrocentricity appears to be delicate especially because it is presented in a somewhat antagonistic manner against conventional systems without necessarily providing political, social and economic structures that drive the philosophy (Omojola, 2008). Omojola (2008) proposes the concept of "Afrocomplementarism" which he describes as a contrasting perspective to Afrocentricity that acknowledges the acceptability of valid traditions and seeks to contribute African perspectives to existing and ongoing discourses to enhance broader yet harmonised knowledge and perspective. This proposition amplifies the need for an Afro-complementary approach in African film production.

## Conclusion: Afro-complementary Lessons from Marvel's Black Panther

*Black Panther's* revenue within a month of its release was put at US\$1.190 billion, exceeding the Nollywood gross box office which is yet to cross the US\$ 1 billion line. This paper thus draws lessons from the content and production of *Black Panther* for Nollywood as a way of further enhancing Africa's image on the global cinematic scene.

The Afro-complementary recommendations of this paper are underpinned by Omojola's (2008) proposition of an "Afrocomplementarism" concept, which he describes as a contrasting perspective to Afrocentricity that acknowledges the acceptability of valid global traditions and seeks to contribute African perspectives to existing and ongoing discourses to enhance broader yet harmonised knowledge. This proposition portrays what this paper recommends—to seek to contribute an African perspective to the global cinematic stage by adopting complementary content creation without undermining Africa's uniqueness and enhancing production quality regardless of the nativity of national affiliation of production teams.

With continued globalisation, the world continues to be more integrated. Lines of demarcation in the literary space are not as sustainable. Hence it is important to strategically forge a synergy especially between the African cinema industry and key global players. The example of *Black Panther* has gone a long way to prove that being Afro-complementary does not necessarily mean a sub-representation. Hence, if the African culture is creatively meshed with global stories, masterpieces can be created that will still re-engineer Africa's image and showcase its culture while increasing the continent's relevance globally and bringing more of the continent's filmmakers and actors to the global stage. This afro-complementary position will not only increase revenue and acceptance for the African cinematic industry, it will enhance true regional visibility for Africa south of the Sahara, showcasing its culture and people and the space they occupy alongside other regions and continents of the world.

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