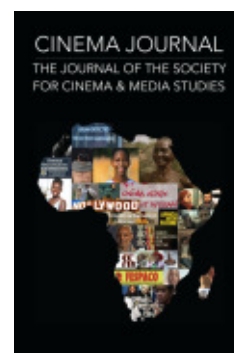## PROJECT MUSE®

African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History

by Carmela Garritano (review)

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

Cinema Journal, Volume 54, Number 2, Winter 2015, pp. 151-154 (Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS: African Caucus

African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History

reviewed by JOSEPH ODURO-FRIMPONG

One of the key defining features of most Ghanaian video movies is that they are embedded—either explicitly or implicitly—in Pentecostal Christian aesthetics. Fittingly, a major research perspective, situated at the juncture of religion and film (and pioneered by Birgit Meyer), elucidates how the movies draw on shared Pentecostal beliefs and practices to mediate themes on occult practices.[1]

In *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History*, Garritano, motivated by her apt identification of the video movies' "unrestrained and unruly heterogeneity" and their concomitant multiple narrative forms, examines a subject with which scholars have so far not explicitly engaged.[2] This characteristic of the video movies as a "shifting and historically contingent discursive field marked by myriad ideologies, anxieties, discourses, and desires" enables the author to explore a historical narration of the Ghanaian movie industry through analyses of selected video movies.[3] This
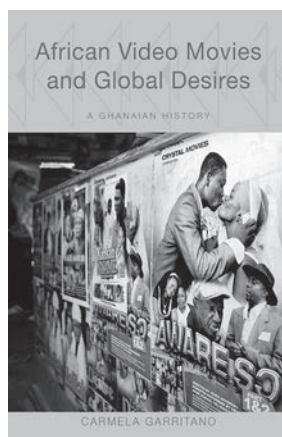
1   For example, see Birgit Meyer, "The Power of Money: Politics, Occult Force, and Pentecostalism in Ghana," *African Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (1998): 15–37; Meyer, "Popular Ghanaian Cinema and 'African Heritage,'" *Africa Today* 46, no. 2 (1999): 93–113; Meyer, "Visions of Blood, Sex, and Money: Fantasy Spaces in Popular Ghanaian Cinema," *Visual Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2003): 15–41; Meyer, "'Praise the Lord': Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 1 (2004): 92–110.

2   Carmela Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013), 19.

3   Ibid., 20.

approach allows the author to show the connection between the economic circumstances that gave rise to the industry and the manifestation of these same conditions within the movies' themes—centered on poverty, work, and gender—that the first generation of producers explored. Here, the author teases out the ways in which the movies normalize and refashion "dominant discourses of globalization, gender and sexuality, neoliberalism, and consumerism."[4] In the same breath, she also emphasizes the manner in which the innumerable number of movies made since the inception of the industry in the 1980s generates a certain ambivalence toward these same themes. The approach also enables the author to explore and elaborate on multiple visual texts and their "variations in aesthetics, narrative form, modes of spectator engagement [as well as] [their] anxieties, desires, subjectivities, and styles."[5]

This discussion is in the introduction to the book. In this same section, Garritano presents the book's thematic focus, offers a short historical overview of the initial negative critiques of video movies by African film and literature scholars, and addresses the global aspirations of the industry's players when she adopts the term *Ghallywood*. Additionally, the introduction includes a succinct summary of the five chapters that make up the book. The introduction together with the conclusion provide the theoretical lens of contextual criticism that underpins this work and the historical approach that the author adopts to investigate the huge changes that have occurred in the Ghanaian video-movie industry.

In "Mapping the Modern: The Gold Coast Film Unit and the Ghana Film Industry Corporation" (chapter 1), Garritano examines the gamut of the history of filmic practices in late colonial Ghana (Gold Coast) as well as early postcolonial independent Ghana, when the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) was established, until its collapse in the 1980s. Consistent with recent approaches in the social sciences that reject simple binaries, Garritano conceptualizes these two histories as "complex, overlapping disjunctive order[s]" that are characteristic of global media cultural practices.[6] This fruitful way of framing the GFIC as not a mere supplanting of the Gold Coast Film Unit (GCFU) enables her to investigate how these units cinematically produced "modernity as articulated in the late modern colonial and the national films."[7] Through a close reading of *Boy Kumasenu* (Sean Graham, 1952; GCFU) and *A Debut for Dede* (Tom Reibero, 1992; GFIC), Garritano teases out how these two films, in their treatment of modernity, tradition, and nation, use stereotypical gender differences in articulating their respective perspectives around these themes. In "Work, Women, and Worldly Wealth" (chapter 2), Garritano explores the early history of the Ghanaian video-movie industry from 1987 to 1992. This period witnessed the country's implementation of a World Bank loan package that required the privatization and liberalization of the nation's economy and media, respectively. Thus, Garritano shows how Ghana, much as in the cultural-political terrain of Togo during the same

4 Ibid., 23.

5 Ibid., 21.

6 Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*, ed. Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 40.

7 Garritano, *African Video Movies*, 26.

period, experienced "a time in which the money [had] dried up, the state [had] pulled back from social and developmental fields, and [nongovernmental organizations] and churches have stepped into the void and begun to reorganize everyday lives and imaginations of those in the city and village."[8] This historical account provides insights into those dire times, which Ghanaians referred to as "tighten[ing] your belt," which paradoxically opened up "opportunities for creative expression and entrepreneurialism left behind by a restrained and weakened nation-state."[9] Simultaneously, this historical approach allows Garritano to examine three key films produced during this period—*Zinabu* (William Akuffo, 1987), *Big Time* (Ramesh Jai, 1989), and *Menace* (Rex Quartey, 1992)—and to discuss, among other issues, the fictionalized realities of that era. Here, she specifically explores the movies' gendered explication of everyday Ghanaians' suspicions of "sudden" and extreme riches. In "Professional Movies and Their Global Aspirations: The Second Wave of Video Production in Ghana" (chapter 3), Garritano expands her critical focus to investigate major transformations in the industry (beginning from 1992 until about 2000) and the particular thematic style that characterized movies produced in that era, such as *Ghost Tears* (Socrate Safo, 1992), *Jennifer: So Lovely, So Deadly* (Nick Narh Teye, 1998), and *Stab in the Dark* (Veronica Quarshie, 1998). Thus, unlike the early years of the industry, populated by so-called amateur producers and directors, the years from 1992 onward marked the "migration of trained film and videomakers" into the industry.[10] In their aim to "professionalize" the field and thus mark themselves as unique, this new generation of filmmakers, as Garritano shows, consciously embarked on certain actions that departed from work of earlier years. They instituted the Ghana Film Awards to recognize movies with superior production values and focused on gendered thematic issues that "normalized middle class comfort [and] domestic disputes and [the] familial conflicts of elite Ghanaians."[11]

In "Tourism and Trafficking: Views from Abroad in the Transnational Travel Movie" (chapter 4), Garritano explores three features of movies that focus on travel. One characteristic of the first wave of this travel-movie genre, also evident in some palm-wine highlife songs of the legendary Koo Nimo ("Abrokyire Abrabo") or the highlife songs of Pat Thomas ("Tu Kwan Na Hwe") and A. B. Crentsil ("Samo"), is that they show the "harsh realities hidden behind the myths of prosperity that lure Africans abroad."[12] Such movies, which targeted the average Ghanaian (African) on the continent who has never traveled outside his "locale," present cities such as New York and Amsterdam as a "curious spectacle [where] characters tour . . . sites and amusement [spaces]."[13]

In "Transcultural Encounters and Local Imaginaries: Nollywood and the Ghanaian Movie Industry in the Twenty-First Century" (chapter 5), Garritano shifts her

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8 Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5.

9 Garritano, *African Video Movies*, 63.

10 Ibid., 93.

11 Ibid., 90.

12 Ibid., 138.

13 Ibid., 148.

historical analysis to the myriad factors that negatively affected the Ghanaian movie industry from 2000 to 2005. Here, she shows, for example, how the (il)legal inflow of Nollywood productions into Ghana, which were not only cheaper but also of higher production value, virtually stifled Ghanaian video features on the market. Garritano also shows how such experiences shaped key dynamics within the industry, such as the practice of coproductions between Ghana and Nigeria, as well as movies targeting audiences fluent in Akan, a widely spoken language in Ghana. The chapter ends with an analysis of two types of movies that represent two of the three major film production traditions in the country. The first type derive their themes from producers' artistic ideas and target an educated, transnational audience. The second type are in Pidgin English, Standard English, and any of the languages spoken in Ghana, all thrown into the mix.[14]

In this impressive work, it is clear that the close analyses of the various visual texts and their respective subject matter are informed by both solid ethnographic fieldwork insights and the supple application of theoretical perspectives from film and literary studies. Overall, the book is a welcome, definitive addition to many (sub)disciplines. In media anthropology, it provides an excellent example of writing a nuanced media ethnographic accounts. In fields such as global or international communication, as well as media and communication, Garritano's work is extremely relevant. Specifically, her work answers calls to counter negative Western representations of Africa by highlighting the production and distribution of media content by and for Africans.[15] Furthermore, *African Video Movies and Global Desires* is relevant to African media studies includes this Ghanaian example of a Global South media phenomenon, which is needed to further the project of de-Westernizing the larger field of media studies. Last, one cannot help but note that when Ghanaian popular culture studies does become an established subfield in African studies, this book should definitely be required reading.   ✳

14   Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, "Sakawa: On Occult Ritual and Cyber Fraud in Ghanaian Popular Cinema" (working paper, Media Anthropology Network e-seminar, European Association of Social Anthropologists, 2011), http://www.media -anthropology.net/file/frimpong_rituals_cyberfraud.pdf.

15   Leslie Steeves, "Call for Abstracts," *Communication, Culture and Critique* (special issue on Africa, media, and globalization, 2014), http://global.icahdq.org/ohana/website/?p=18615433.