Warped identities: dress in popular West African video films

Esi Dogbe

The camera zeroes in on beautifully braided hair, then rests on finely manicured hands flashing long flaming red nails, as the mystery character shifts the gears in her Toyota car. Next, the lens lingers seductively on her legs, inches slowly up her thighs, then cuts swiftly to the steering wheel and dashboard in a deft move that appears to meld machine and woman into one pulsating entity. After this three-minute opening sequence, the camera zooms out to reveal a silhouetted figure inside the car as it pulls to a stop. The door opens and out slide leather-strapped feet atop high chunky heels, a jeweled ankle, and curvaceous legs that come to an abrupt end at the hem of a black mini skirt. The character’s voluptuousness is obvious, and sharply in contrast to her silenced voice even as she is shown animatedly mouthing words to a visibly shaken male interlocutor at the other end of the phone. It is only when she returns the phone to its cradle and breaks into a knowing smile that the camera reveals her face in full light.

This clichéd opening of Nigerian filmmaker Zeb Ejiro’s video film, Intimate Strangers (2000), has the familiar markings of Mulvey’s (1989) concept of Hollywood-style fetishistic scopophilia, where the camera lens meticulously tallies fragments of body parts to define the mystery woman as a de facto object for male conquest and possession (see also Petty 1996). The young woman, Ambolin (her name suggests ‘ambling’ and thus the idea of wandering from one man to another), appears as a universally recognizable femme fatale, a ‘Jezebel,’ a ‘gold-digger,’ and a ‘dutiful’ wife’s ubiquitous nemesis come to ‘wreck’ her ‘happy’ family. Or is she? The slick opening sequence quickly cues the audience to familiar social and moral webs of conflict. It is a conflict that draws predictable battle lines between those who invoke the essential evilness of women as destroyers of men, and those who point to an engulfing corrupt and kleptocratic culture in contemporary Africa that stimulates powerful men’s insatiable desires for female trophies. However, as will become clearer in the detailed discussion of this film later below, identity as portrayed in the film through dress belies a more convoluted storyline. As the plot unfolds, the fault
lines are not so simple. Nevertheless, as frequently happens in the fantasy world of soap operas, there are enough ‘silver linings,’ and must-have fashions left at the end of this video film to transport the audience beyond the screen to both new and familiar pleasure zones.

Si(gh)ting dress in video films

This article focuses on a highly visible aspect of popular West African video film – dress – and the multiple roles it plays on as well as beyond the screen. By its very textured presence in time and space, dress brings the performance alive for audiences by connecting their visual and tactile senses to the unfolding narrative itself and the identities of the fictional characters therein. When we visually encounter characters in film, the first line of recognition of these characters is enabled through their dress – what they look like is the initial mode of apprehending their role. Especially in film where action is a key component, dress enables motion, and provides a silhouette or profile of the character. Exactly how does dress shape and define the identities of the characters? First of all, this article adapts Roach-Higgins and Eicher’s (1995: 7) pliable definition of ‘dress’ as ‘an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplement to the body’ – which definition makes it possible to include the myriad forms of African body adornment portrayed in the fictional space of films under discussion. It also makes it possible to account for extra-corporeal entities (such as ghosts, spirits, ancestors, witches, etc.) that also inhabit these films.

Through in-depth content analysis of selected films, the article examines the roles that dress plays in Nigerian and Ghanaian video films whose immense popularity is extending beyond the West African region across the African continent, and also into niche markets among African immigrants in Europe and the Americas (Meyer 1999; Haynes 2000; Dogbe 2002). As the discussion will demonstrate, three dimensions of dress appear to be a staple element of the visual fare served by the video films explored here. First, dress situates characters (living, dead, or spirit) in specific spatio-temporal frames that are complementary to the film narrative. In these fictional filmic spaces, what characters wear, how they wear what they wear, and the social rewards or punishment associated with what they wear, are pertinent cues to the political, economic, and cultural conversations within and without the frame. The function of various forms of dress may remain constant or change as the action unfolds, marking, among other things, characters’ socio-economic status, gender roles, psychological behavior, and sexuality.

However, despite such close association with the bodies of characters who bring dimensionality through kinesis, dress is more than a complement to the characters’ action, thoughts and dialogue, or psychological development. In this second dimension, dress constitutes an independent narrative thread suffused with symbolic assets from which intertextual links to other discourses proliferate. Dress therefore also reflects the dissonance between the body and its
encasements, and conflates the real and the fantastic (Davis 1992; Crane 2000), as well as portrays the discords of contemporary African social reality. As Bruzzi notes, rather than transparently prop up the narrative, clothes sometimes disrupt the narrative, for transparency cannot be assumed to exist between them and the identity of characters or the direction of the narrative, as clothes ‘collide with the sequences in which they are placed because they carry an alternative, independent meaning that is not necessarily subservient to or even compatible with that of the dominant narrative’ (1997: 17). Applied particularly to the question of how dress functions in video films, the foregoing argument would suggest that dress plays a less prescriptive ideological role, and is more prone to portraying the untidy consciousness and ambiguous experiences of modernity that inform characters’ and audiences’ lives.

Simultaneously, dress as a signifier in film can itself block access to those other pertinent discourses within and without the film narrative, since it appears to overly call visual attention to its own materiality, training everyone’s eyes onto itself as a commodity. This third dimension, the fetishistic aspect which plays on the visceral and tactile effects of dress, drives consumption (and production), induces desire, and fulfills certain affective needs of the audience whether the focus is on image, style (classic or trendy fashion), cut, hang, or provenance. While film is not the only visual fashion reference point for African audiences, its increasing reach in both the regional and African diaspora markets is substantial enough for video filmmakers to pay very close attention to the spectacle effect of dress and other material props in the films since these do have some bearing on the profitability of their product in a highly competitive popular cultural market. Indeed, one of the recurrent points that Ghanaian video filmmakers have made is the fact that the lavish visual fare – the expensive clothes, homes, cars, and panoramic rides through slick urban zones that have become signature props of the genre (and about which critics have complained) – comes from the influence of their Nigerian counterparts, which they must emulate in order to satisfy audiences’ expectations and their own bottom line.

‘Warped’ media

The term ‘warped’ used in the title of this article is derived from two seemingly contradictory definitions that I find particularly useful (Merriam Webster Collegiate 2001). In textile weaving processes, the warp is the lengthwise yarn that constitutes the foundation in and out of which the weft (crosswise) threads are woven in a variety of ways, and to which other decorative designs may be added. In many West African strip-weaving traditions which have produced such legendary cloth types as kente (Asante and Ewe varieties), Yoruba aso oke, and the Hausa blue cloth, the warp yarns which are totally covered by the more colorful weft threads and embroidered float patterns actually constitute the most significant part of the cloth in determining quality, length,
proper graining, and durability. The other meaning of warp, which is equally apt in this context, is the idea of distorting, twisting or curving something away from its intended trajectory. 'Distortion' captures the passive subjection to structural forces that change one's identity, but it also accounts for the possibility of (partial) agency where the subject consciously effects distortion or identity masking as a way to render the self opaque, plural and unknowable. Both senses of ‘warp’ in the fictional context of film provide fertile terrain for exploring the form and content of video films. While this article will dwell on one aspect of the content of video films – dress – in relation to the concept of warping, a look at how the form and conditions of production of video filmmaking itself are ‘warped’ provides useful context for the larger discussion.

The very genesis of video filmmaking in West Africa, specifically in Ghana and in Nigeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s, ushered in a new ‘twist’ in the filmmaking tradition that had developed during and after the colonial period. If colonial cinema was about reinforcing assumptions about a primitive and prelogical Africa incapable of apprehending 'non-stereoscopic' images (Burns 2000: 199), first generation African filmmakers set about visually reclaiming out of that dis-eased (in both senses of being sick and discomfited) and fragmented (post)-colonized body a dignified subject that was in harmony with the autochthonous African culture. The manifestos and communiqués of various African film fora, conferences, and festivals as well as published studies have stressed the role of African film 'as a crucial site of the battle to decolonise minds, to develop radical consciousness, to reflect and engage critically with African cultures and traditions to make desirable and meaningful transformations of society for the benefit of the majority' (Bakari and Cham 1996: 2). The celluloid film industry that was spawned in post-independence Africa produced such highly acclaimed filmmakers as Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Mambety, Haile Gerima, Gaston Kaboré, Med Hondo, Idrissa Ouedrago, and Kwaw Ansah, and women filmmakers such as Sarah Maldoror, Assia Djebar, Safi Faye, Flora Gomes, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, among others. The industry enjoyed varied levels of state support (which was greater in Francophone countries where French government involvement was very substantial) and other organizational support. However, much of the state support fizzled out with the mounting economic crises and political turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s.

Unlike the celluloid film industry that preceded it, which was heavily dosed on government (local and foreign) patronage in a role that Akudinobi (1997) calls 'cultural midwifery,' video films were born in the crevices of entrepreneurial ingenuity when the African continent began its dance with IMF/World Bank-imposed Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP). The SAP script mandating client governments to go on lean fiscal diets, roll back the nation-state, implement drastic cuts in social spending, and retrench state employees, created a cohort of the unemployed (or unemployable). At the same time, a new post-independence generation that would become a fertile market for new (and old) forms of global consumption and leisure pursuits also matured. Out of this pool of desperate yet resourceful youth, who had also grown up on a diet of
Hollywood, Indian, and Chinese action films, emerged the first video filmmakers, who would appropriate the accessible video technologies of the late 1980s to tell stories outside official scrutiny, and at the same time turn a profit (Dogbe 2002). Video filmmaking’s ‘warp’ (i.e. strength), therefore, lies in the way it resolved two particularly pernicious problems that had plagued celluloid filmmaking – (1) inaccessibility to the mass of African audiences (Nama 1996), and (2) non-profitability. The video film industry appropriated relatively cheap new technologies of production, but adapted existing ‘informal’ distribution/marketing networks through which video cassettes were aggressively hawked alongside other popular cultural commodities (music, second-hand clothing, food, etc.). In Nigeria, cassettes alone make up the bulk of sales receipts, while in Ghana new releases are promoted with heavy publicity (using street floats, television commercials, and posters), and audiences are initially cultivated at commercial screenings across urban and rural centers in makeshift video theaters comprising nothing more than a television set, VCR and modest seating for patrons. Although mostly operating on shoestring budgets, video filmmaking has afforded producers some level of financial independence (and thus a modicum of editorial independence as well).\(^1\) The sheer volume of video films produced in Ghana, Nigeria and increasingly in other African countries not only exceeds, several times over, the quantity of celluloid films produced since the era of African independence, but fills a niche different from the celluloid film tradition, in the construction of a specific popular cultural archive comparable to popular music, popular theater, and pulp fiction (Haynes 2000).\(^2\)

Some critics (Meyer 1999; Haynes 2000) argue that because video filmmakers have not felt any obligation to use their medium to wage anti-colonial battles, or to recuperate a wholesome African culture to combat the relentless march of Western cultural hegemony, their product has been able to conflate those enduring binary oppositions between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity,’ African and Western, rational reasoning versus belief in the supernatural. Video filmmakers claim to tell stories that entertain and resonate intimately with the craggy realities and fantasies of local audiences, while turning a profit too. It is these very claims that have incensed film critics, and cultural commentators who condemn video filmmakers as purveyors of crass commercialism, ideological conservatism, sexism, superstition, and negative stereotypes about African culture and peoples. The technology of video is also considered ‘a poor cousin’ of celluloid filmmaking, while the cinematography, editing, sound and acting qualities have all been labeled sub-standard (read: unsuitable for screening at international film festivals or for global distribution). Likewise, existing critical tools (especially Third Cinema theories) which focus on a pan-African ethos and radical engagement with anti-imperialist themes (Haynes 2000) have proven inadequate for making sense of the genre.

In a different ‘twist,’ English-language video films, especially from Nigeria and Ghana, are pan-African in a more pragmatic way, since through television programming and far-reaching informal (i.e. outside government or Western-controlled) film distribution networks they currently command a continent-wide
popular viewership from Sierra Leone to Kenya to South Africa. Outside the African continent, authentic and pirated copies of video films are ubiquitous commodities sitting on shelves right next to African foodstuffs in 'ethnic' shops across European and North American cities. To the extent that video filmmaking has spurted out of the shadows of state-sponsored film industry and its colonial imprint, it is a kind of post-colonial form, replete with ambiguities. It simultaneously subverts and reinforces the neo-colonial status quo while putting forth recuperated popular cultural discourses that (re)present new aspirations and modes of explaining contemporary reality and disappointments. West African video filmmaking aspires to serve its target audience escapist pageantry comparable to that which Hollywood (and Bollywood and Chinese) films offer, but finds it must wrestle with the barriers of 'non-reciprocal penetration' of the global marketplace (Gibson-Graham 1996: 124–5) even if it has found ingenious ways to slip through the cracks of global flows. Thus the question remains: if video films seem to naturalize, even banalize, those nationalist and recuperative agendas that are supposed to hold great significance for an Africa still struggling to wean itself from a colonial identity crisis, what is the ideological purchase of video filmmakers’ claims to just tell stories with which people can identify during this era of crisis of modernity infused with spectacular moments of pure jouissance and equally spectacular views of the giant cracks in the modernity that Africans have encountered?

Making sense of African 'wahalas'3

Video films seek to 'make sense of what appears senseless or arbitrary' (Chabal and Daloz 1999: xvi) about African realities. Critics argue that the video films proliferating on the continent are overtly silent on the loud gong of political realities on the continent even as the narratives resonate intimately with the audiences who watch them. Perhaps the films are not so silent on overt political commentary as is assumed. As Chabal and Daloz (1999: 52) suggest, a more 'inclusive' and 'extensive' definition of what is politics in contemporary African societies would take into account multiple aspects of the relationship between the individual and community ... [and] more extensive in that it projects varying degrees of intensity into other realms of human existence: social, economic, religious, cultural etc. so that for instance, the occult remains of immediate practical relevance to the conduct of politics.

This suggests more 'porous' boundaries of politics to include areas less obviously political. If that is the case, it would probably not be an exaggeration to argue that dress along with other components within the films functions in deeper symbolic ways as referents to socio-political realities without overtly announcing them to be such. For instance, the voluminous three-piece Nigerian agbada, complete with jewel-studded hat, walking stick, and fine Italian leather shoes, denotes, on one level, a purely ceremonial Nigerian men’s garb whose
popularity has extended to pan-African consumers. But the ensemble also connotes the suspicious ‘Shagari’ image of corpulent and corrupt inhalers of the nation’s wealth (Bastian 1996: 104–5). The juxtaposition of bedecked characters alongside the little people – housemaids, drivers, watchmen, etc. – and the whole entourage of wives and extended family members makes the agbada dress an easily identifiable shorthand for a particular class whose source of wealth cannot be easily fathomed (indeed hidden in the voluminous folds of the dress).

In a sense, by resorting to familiar visual clichés and seemingly shallow explanations of socio-political realities, the films attempt to accord some agency to the characters. The absent overtly political commentary is precisely so because no one seems capable of getting their arms around it. What lies within reach of the individual, family, or community, however, is some form of control over spiritual forces – i.e. what seems irrational is actually more easily understood and can be acted upon with some degree of instrumentality and competence. These matters lie within the realm of qualifiable experience. For example, people may not get the hang of Western-style zero-sum democracy as practiced through multi-party elections, because they have not seen it work in their lives or communities. On the other hand, the experience of juju, demonic forces and other elements of the occult, Christian deliverance or the Marabou’s divination, is real and believed to work since the irrational world (which I prefer to call 'expanded spatio-temporal' imaginary because it grasps the fluid instrumentalization of all realms of existence) potentially possesses power ‘stronger than human agency’ (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 68). Testimony about these practical influences on daily living exists within reach. Belief in the occult is firmly grounded in lived experience, as it also provides psychological and material therapy to the socio-economic disorders of the ‘modern post-colonial world.’ Belief in the occult localizes accountability, which becomes even more important in a world where globalizing forces increasingly erode agency at the local and individual level, and seems to provide an instrumental way of wrapping one’s arm around the destabilizing effects of daily living. The world of the occult constitutes a favorite terrain in many West African video films for realistic as well as fictional portraits, which fact has elicited charges of ideological retrogression from critics who would like video filmmaking’s popular reach (which the celluloid tradition does not possess) to cultivate critical consciousness among Africa’s masses. The point here is not to uncritically celebrate the content choices of video filmmakers but to explain how they project the world to popular audiences, as well as activate their cultural competencies. It also means that the mechanisms for apprehending reality are not exhaustive but rather permit continuity such that threads of agency are available for individual and collective use. These threads in turn generate a surplus of real or apparent ways of handling daily living through ever familiar and ever changing ways. It is also apparent that no one is under the illusion of being totally empowered by these modes of individual and collective supplementation.

In both real and fictional realms, the success of the film-viewing experience derives from the successful deployment of what Douglas and Hargadon (2001:
154), in the context of interactive video games, describe as 'schemas' that enable 'us to perceive objects and occurrences around us and to make efficient sense of them by consulting our readymade store of similar occurrences and understandings.' These schemas may be 'immersive affective experiences' where audiences 'temporarily escape the stresses of everyday life or vicariously enjoy the exploits of fictional characters as an antidote to the mundanity of their own lives' or 'engaged affective experiences' that require the audience 'to assume an extra-textual perspective on the text itself, as well as the schemas that have shaped it and the scripts operating within it' (2001: 156). In the actual context of performance, audiences weave in and out of immersive and engaged affective modes, and it is the outcome of the composite experience that in turn fashions their indifference to, affirmation of, or rejection of the performance. This point also resonates with Muñoz's (1994: 98) concept of 'analogical-referential operations,' which refers to the accumulated cultural capital and memories that the audience already possesses, and which are reshaped with new experiences (Dogbe 2002). These referents create 'a competency, a taste, a way of seeing' (Muñoz 1994: 97) that is 'heightened with the new visual experience of seeing ''more of ourselves'' on screen – as subjects' (Dogbe 2002).

Thus, audiences are enthralled by the familiarity of the universe of discourse of the films as well as the technological wizardry that repackages these familiar yet fictional narratives into 'modern' commodities. The transformation of 'familiar' narratives, 'the pleasure of seeing and re-seeing and reknowing – again and again – illusion, poetic illusion' (Muñoz 1994: 99) is similar to what is desired of 'traditional' storytellers whose stories are expected to be familiar yet fresh – not static. The stories, tensions, paradoxes and otherworldly exploits that are told constitute reworkings of familiar tales, both lived and fictional. As Haynes (2000) has observed in the case of Nigerian video films, the films:

Offer the strongest, most accessible expression of contemporary Nigerian popular culture. ... They are a prime instance of the interpenetration of the global and the local through the international commerce in cultural forms. ...

And they are a prime instance of African modernity.

Similarly, Waterman (1997: 51) observes in his aptly titled essay, 'Our tradition is a very Modern Tradition,' how popular cultural forms such as the syncretic juju music enables a 'cosmopolitan electronic' configuration of a constructed 'indigenous' identity.

**Dress in video films**

As highly popular sites of production and consumption of popular fiction, video films also act as refractors of fashion and its consumption in contemporary African society. Film by its very constitution commodifies fantasy, mimics and constructs desire, and serves it up in stylized form for consumption and subsequent reproduction. Dress in video films, therefore, provides an interesting vista into the ideologies that go into the making of these visual narratives. While
dress fashion in West African video films cannot be said to have the same kind
of influence in determining or setting the pace for fashion trends as did the
costumes of Hollywood starlets in the 1940s and 1950s, it defines a particular
post-colonial temporality uniting the myriad urban existences across sub-
Saharan Africa. This urban unity adds to the familiarity that audiences as far
apart as Kenya and Sierra Leone feel with a Nigerian or Ghanaian video film.
African dress along with actors acquires ‘distanced’ appeal on screen since both
are taken from the ‘near/local’ and rendered ‘global’ and popular through
modern technology – which process reintroduces the ‘local’ for a new form of
consumption.

Dress in video filmmaking is not a big budget component of these shoestring
productions. In some cases actors themselves provide their own wardrobe.
However, that constraint (if it may be called such) does not diminish the
capacity for dress to communicate complex symbolic and esthetic significance.
For example, something as readily and cheaply procurable as white cloth for the
mystic’s costume worn by the Krishna devotee character in Helen Ukpabio’s
Wasted Years (2000) conveys no less effectively the intolerant evangelical
Christian viewpoint of the film that stereotypes all belief systems besides itself
as demonic.

Independent of the didactic intent of the filmmaker, the Krishna devotee’s
practices – divining and providing charms (at a hefty fee, of course) to ‘fortify’
the protagonist against the murderous intentions of malevolent peers – do not
seem implausible or outrageous in real life. His powers constitute just one
source from an evolving syncretic cultural wellspring available to negotiate the
competitiveness and constraints of modern existence. Indeed, the influence of
stock characters from Indian films – especially mystics, goddesses, and certain
adapted fashions – is unmistakable in a number of West African video films. The
long history of Indian and Chinese films proliferating in African markets is
implicated in what Larkin (1997) calls ‘parallel modernities.’ These South–South
transcultural transactions (including other popular cultural products like music
and fashion), which have operated outside the direct orbit of Western-centered
hegemonic global flows, produce ‘the coexistence in space and time of multiple
economic, religious and cultural flows that are subsumed within the term
“modernity”’. These ‘parallel modernities’ enable dissimilar cultures to
‘participate in the imagined realities of other cultures as part of their daily
lives’ (1997: 407), which in the case of Indian and Chinese films accounts for a
substantial part of what some segments of African audiences have actually been
watching.

The discussion in this section dwells on four randomly selected films – two
Ghanaian and two Nigerian video films – that will illustrate some of the issues
discussed in the previous sections. The films include Zeb Ejiro’s Intimate
Strangers (2000), Helen Ukpabio’s Wasted Years (2000), Veronica Codjoe’s
three-part A Stab in the Dark (2000), and Hajia Hawa Melzongo’s Dza Gbele
(1994). A synopsis of each film is included to set a contextual frame within which
to examine the polyvalence of dress in the fictional worlds of film.
Urban chic and insecurities in *Intimate Strangers*

To return to Ejiro’s *Intimate Strangers* (2000), discussed at the opening of this article, the location of the narrative, names, references, and the characters’ dress are all easily identifiable as *Nigerian*. However, there is an equally de-localized dimension that facilitates the substitution of other African urban locales for the film’s terrain. The cityscape comprising traffic-snarled pot-holed roads, heavily populated slums in close proximity to gated mansions, minivan public transportation (variously called *matatu*, *trotro*, *minitaxis* in different African countries), and throbbing street life are all visual cues to similar post-colonial spaces elsewhere on the continent.

When Ambolin’s face is revealed at the end of the opening sequence, her beauty, sophisticated urban dress, sassiness, dexterity with modern gadgets, and ‘high society’ lifestyle all easily identify her as another variant of the stereotypical unattached ‘wicked,’ ‘parasitic,’ and ‘wayward’ modern woman in post-colonial Africa (it is also significant that she is lighter-skinned than the missus character in the film; which effect could be attributed to skin-bleaching creams), who purportedly disrupts social harmony in real or fictional life (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001; Davies 1986). As Hodgson and McCurdy (2001: 6) have posited, ‘wicked’ women are so labeled because they constitute a transgressive force against normative female roles of ‘wife, mother, sister, or daughter.’ Contrasting the world of this mobile ‘bombshell,’ is the comfort-filled upper-class domain of the ‘good wife’ and mother, Divine. The latter is visually portrayed clad in matronly embroidered caftans and other bland outfits that hint at the family’s wealth, yet hide her body in a cloak of asexual dignity. Even though Divine does not possess the kind of fleshly ‘amplitude’ symbolizing fertility that MacRae (1997: 18) identifies as the recurrent portrait of the matron in African films, her role as the ‘proper woman of the house’ seems clearly defined in her name and through both her actions and dress code.

Suspended between Ambolin and Divine is the protagonist, Jeff Amadi-Peters, who effortlessly exudes charm and virility as a young and very successful lawyer. Jeff is one idealized version of the contemporary Nigerian cosmopolitan man – one who savvily switches between European business suits and the elegantly updated but less voluminous two-piece Nigerian *agbada* dress with the same ease that he code-switches between standard English (as per the legacy of the British colonial educational system), Nigerian pidgin English, and his indigenous language. This mobile-phone-wielding *globalized* man can operate confidently in world metropolises with the same fluidity that he plays lineage politics at the local level, as well as the roles of hands-on father and romantic husband. However, as previously hinted, dress offers no obvious clue to the warped identities of the characters. The exotic Ambolin – whose fictional siblings in African literature and film include Soyinka’s (1963) Madame Tortoise, Ekwensi’s (1961, 1968) Jagua Nana, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s (1977) Wanja, Flora Gomes’ (1991) Yonta in *Udju Azul di Yonta* (The Blue Eyes of Yonta), or Mambety’s (1992) Linguere Ramatou in *Hyenas*, among others – is not exactly the
'man-eating' temptress she at first appears to be, and neither is Divine the placid dutiful wife that is at first portrayed. Likewise, Jeff’s outward image of young cosmopolitan success evoked through his neo-African chic dress comes to mask layers of insecurity. In a twist of fate, when Ambolin knocks on the Amadi-Peters’ placid life to reveal that she had borne Jeff a son after a heady affair eight years previously, and Divine strongly insists that her husband could not have fathered Ambolin’s son, Jeff is belatedly brought face to face with the meaning of manhood as defined by his society – the capacity to father children.

Before he can confront that issue, Jeff first has to deal with Ambolin’s threat to tell his wife about the affair, and ‘rubbish his name’ in the press. He gathers the courage to tell his wife, and is relieved when she readily forgives him, but puzzled at her insistence that he cannot have fathered Ambolin’s son. In Jeff’s frenzied bid to disprove Ambolin’s claims, the audience is taken on journeys to the familiar (neo-colonial) architecture of African hospitals (of course the fantasy here is that the staff are unusually efficient in this film) where paternity tests are conducted. Ambolin rather quickly exits the story in tears, when the paternity test results come back negative.

This sudden disappearance renders her role rather perplexing. It would seem that her flashy presence accounts for nothing more than a facilitator’s role – one who only catalyzes the action in new directions. Ambolin’s grand entry into the narrative enables Jeff and Divine to purge their marriage of the big lie on which it rests. Like the proverbial scapegoat, hers is a presence that induces ‘confession and salvation’ among others. But she herself cannot be redeemed and is left to face the prospect of lonely motherhood (as her hopes of creating a ‘family’ – complete with a ‘father’ – for her son are dashed) and diminishing ‘shelf life’ as a commodity for powerful men’s consumption.

When initial paternity tests disprove Ambolin’s claims and Divine assures him of her forgiveness, a hugely relieved Jeff runs out and buys his wife a sexy sequined dress and jewelry, as well as a series of wild romantic escapades – beach, horse riding, and romantic dinners. However, a few frames later when doctors reveal the truth to Jeff about his own infertility (probably suffering the condition of azoospermia), it is a frazzled-looking Divine who cannot get his forgiveness for having committed adultery with their chauffeur, Kome, as she explains:

You’ll never know the pressure I was under … five years of marriage and not a child. Each year your mother never failed to remind me of my childlessness, that I was wasting your money without giving them a child.

At this point, a sequence of flashbacks shows Jeff’s mother well-attired in expensive Aso Oke and a towering gele atop her head, screaming at Divine;

All this talk about the doctor saying you are all right is rubbish. If you are all right then give me a grandchild … [otherwise] you have no function in my son’s life …

The film slowly peels open a topic often hushed up in popular African discourses – male infertility. On a continent where the imperative of ‘family’ continues to define individual and group identity formation, and where the family, lineage, or
clan is construed as a corporate entity whose viability is the non-negotiable duty of all members. Jeff’s is more than an unspeakable problem. However, since the burden of motherhood in African societies is still women’s alone to bear, and the pressure from Jeff’s family on Divine to provide the family with ‘an heir’ is relentless, even though she does not have a medical problem, the only ‘palatable’ solution available to maintain the existing façade of well-being is also the one fraught with betrayal, adultery, and death (real and symbolic).

Divine’s reasoning that she did the deed to protect Jeff’s manhood only drives him to drunken outbursts against all women being ‘ashawo’ (prostitutes). Jeff’s moral compass, however, swings back when a client’s case reminds him that he is the only father his children, biological or not, had known. In true melodramatic fashion, Jeff goes home in the nick of time to stop Divine and the children from leaving him, and decides to tell Kome the truth. And as if on cue, Kome is fatally wounded in a car accident. At the hospital, he insists on making a confession to Jeff, to which the latter replies:

For what? That you slept with my wife; that her children are yours? You can have them back, you know. There’s nothing to forgive.

The film ends after Kome draws his last breath. This convenient exit from the narrative neutralizes the provocative elements of the story, and instead restores an unruffled patriarchal order. The secret of Jeff’s ‘manhood’ survives the ordeal intact. No one but the doctors need know about his condition – certainly not his extended family. In the narrow hospital hallway outside the ward where Kome has just died, the closing frame is filled with Jeff’s enlarged presence as he comforts a drably dressed and diminutive-looking Divine weeping uncontrollably into his chest. ‘Harmony’ restored!

Womanhood ‘wrapped’ and tied in A Stab in the Dark

A Stab in the Dark (2000) is a three-part story centering on the life of a young woman, Effie, who develops from a protected adolescent under the care of her divorced mother, into a ruthless ‘predator’ who seeks to destroy the family of her best friend. ‘Sugardaddies’ fulfill her three essential needs: affection, money, and father figures. To find the space to satisfy these desires, Effie wangles her way out of the strict regime at home to go and live temporarily with her best friend’s family. Living with Kate’s family brings Effie a sense of belonging to a ‘complete’ home that has a father figure. However the arrangement soon turns into a nightmare for her hosts when an affair develops between Effie and her friend’s father, Victor Ansah. Blame is disproportionately directed at Effie (barely out of high school) and not at Victor who is portrayed as the victim of Effie’s seductive prowess. Victor’s blatant chauvinism enables him to turn the tables on his powerless wife, Ivy (whom he chastises for having caught him red-handed in bed with the young Effie), such that she leaves for her parents’ home in the village. An outraged Kate finds that only she can save her family from collapse, and hatches a plan to lure Effie away from her father with
the collusion of her fiancé, Kwame, just arrived from Europe. The tactic works somehow, as Effie falls for Kwame’s young cosmopolitan appeal, only to later discover the truth. Humiliated, homeless, and already disowned by her mother for bringing shame upon the family, Effie seeks refuge with another old friend, Lola. The tough-talking tight-jeans-wearing motorbike-riding Lola, who makes a living smuggling goods, currencies and drugs, immediately goes about transforming Effie into a woman with guts who ‘takes no s—t from no man.’ Lola and her equally butch ‘business’ partner, Adjoa, sport the image of ‘dangerous’ Ghanaian women who threaten the so-called traditional boundaries and ‘natural’ virtues of womanhood. Together all three women devise a plan to avenge Effie’s humiliation and also get some monetary compensation. For starters, the three-woman posse stalks and one night succeeds in beating up the now-pregnant Kate. Brandishing the knowledge she gained about Victor’s crooked business dealings when she worked as his temporary secretary (becoming his mistress in the process), Effie threatens to expose him to his European business partners unless he coughs up a huge amount of money to buy her silence. Victor’s recalcitrance only angers the women, who bark at his friend and emissary (Boakye) that ‘You men have your way with us and then go scot-free. Well, we take our pound of flesh when we deserve it!’ The ‘pound of flesh’ also included Kate’s, whose wedding to Kwame the trio tried to halt. This melodramatic episode is heightened by the color contrast between the all-black-clad liquor-swigging women and Kate’s white (and therefore virginal) European-style wedding ensemble. Boakye’s frenzied offer of the ‘ransom’ money bails Victor out at the last minute, thus freeing the wedding to proceed. Nevertheless, to restore ‘harmony,’ the moral patch at the end of the film shows the bond destroyed between the three women after a fist fight over how to share the money. Lola and Adjoa are arrested on charges of currency and drug trafficking and are paraded on national television, while Effie surprisingly emerges in hospital a survivor, albeit drained and beaten.

It is significant that the visual portrait of the three-woman posse always clad in tight black pants and form-fitting blouses, complete with hip-looking black sunglasses, as ‘alien’ elements within the culture, is reinforced by the moral opprobrium directed against them. Hence they are purged from the ethical order at the end of the film. Similarly, the value of their dress is symbolically transacted vis-à-vis the matronly ‘slit,’ ‘kaba,’ and ‘duku’ Ghanaian dress style of Ivy’s (Kate’s mother) universe and its extensions into the village space where she finds sanctuary. Ivy’s dress is ambiguously depicted. On the one hand it proffers a sense of comfort, propriety, and retreat from the insanity of modern life of the youth. On the other hand, those same protections become traps that reinforce powerlessness and social marginalization. Ivy’s confinement in the slit/kaba ensemble heightens her dependency while spatially and symbolically restricting her mobility to the orbits of her husband’s home (culturally she cannot claim co-ownership of her marital home), her parents’ home, or ‘all-night’ prayer meetings. It is instructive that these three orbits are disempowering. When Ivy goes to her parents to complain about her husband’s
infidelity, their only response is that a good woman absorbs the vicissitudes of married life in her stride (as if her *slit* allowed her ample room to move her legs!). Nor can Ivy count on her pastor’s constructive help, not when he advises a friend of hers in a comparable situation to just return to her husband and pray to God. In this film it therefore appears that women’s powerlessness is refracted through the *slit* and *kaba* ensemble, which in this film conveys dignity and conservatism and so-called traditional markers of female docility.

*Slit* and *kaba* also define generational, occupational, and status boundaries between single and married women. Ivy as a housewife is visually marked by location and dress as dependent on her husband, who alternates between the business suit and casual trouser–shirt ensembles. In all three films, Ivy wears a syncretic mix of dresses that express a ‘contained’ cosmopolitanism. Thus, even when she is not wearing *slit* and *kaba*, her other dresses are equally conservative body-enclosing styles such as embroidered boubou (long tunic with Sahelian origins), or batiked *anago* ensemble (Yoruba-style wrapper and short tunic). Her braided hair is either held up on her crown or covered with a nondescript headwrap. Equally nondescript are her jewelry and footwear. Ivy’s sartorial image is reinforced by her religious beliefs which the film alludes to when she indicates in one scene that she is going to an ‘all-night.’ The term is a shorthand for all-night prayer sessions prevalent in many evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Ghana that have become a ubiquitous dimension of the cultural fabric of contemporary Ghanaian society and elsewhere in Africa (see Gifford 1998). Ivy ties her social status to her religious practices, in contrast to Victor’s success which is framed in a secular ethos.

Effie’s and Kate’s dress represents youthful vigor, fashion consciousness, and a kaleidoscope of the cannibalized global commodities that have become part of contemporary African consumption patterns. Depending on place and time, Kate wears a variety of clothing styles including body-baring clubwear, liquefied dresses (Hall 2001), and batiked casual ensembles. As she matures in the story she wears *slit* and *kaba* and ultimately the Western-style nuptial dress. Her hair is sometimes worn braided, or with a straight perm, or wrapped with African cloth. Effie’s dress on the other hand reveals a keen awareness of her body’s sensuousness and value as a commodity that she trades to older men for monetary and affective rewards. Before their relationship falls apart, both young women wear the same body-revealing clothes on their secret nightly jaunts with boyfriends. That these clothes were worn outside the purview of parents sharpens the gap between permitted and illicit dress within the culture. When Effie’s fortunes change in the story, though, her dress changes from the ultra-feminine little ‘nothings,’ to the butch look sported by her friends, Lola and Adjoa.

**Dress, sex, and sexuality**

In a film dealing with various forms of exploitation including sexual exploitation, dress is used as both a covert and overt currency in familial, public, and gender
transactions. Effie’s dress image is constructed to explicitly hawk her sexual availability to the same degree that Ivy’s erases her own sexual desires. As a good wife and mother, Ivy is framed into an immutable position. Her marginalization gets progressively worse in the visual narrative, until the end when her personality is almost obliterated, in contrast to her husband’s visible portrait as a wounded animal, and (rightful) custodian of a normative patriarchal order under siege from a posse of outlaw women.

Ironically, Victor is able to buy back and restore his patriarchal authority at the eleventh hour before his daughter’s wedding. In Kate’s case, being finally ‘free’ to get married signals the beginning of a different reality. First, Kate’s position at this concluding point – as the sacrificial lamb at the altar of patriarchy – recalls Nana’s famous cryptic remark in Ama Ata Aidoo’s Changes (1992: 107), in response to her granddaughter’s (Esi) question about marriage:

why do you think they took so much trouble with a girl on her wedding day? ... we were told that people who were condemned to death were granted any wish on the eve of their execution ... anyhow a young woman on her wedding day was something like that. She was made much of, because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been.

Quite interestingly, in a real-life Ghanaian context, the funeral and wedding day could not be more visually linked than through the practice of dressing up deceased women in their wedding gowns, ostensibly to demonstrate that they had been ‘properly’ married in church. Kate’s veiling and symbolic ‘shrouding’ at the end of the film literally prunes away her earlier feistiness and strong voice when her fiancé was not physically around. However, by being hitched to someone who has just arrived from ‘abroad,’ it is implied that Kate’s future is secure as she will be taken to that utopic location and thus escape the dreariness of the local Ghanaian space. As argued elsewhere, possessing familial connections ‘abroad,’ or, even better still, being able to go ‘there’ oneself, signals an important credentializing facet of people’s social identities and economic health. The lure of ‘abroad’ (or the popular Akan word, ‘Aburokyire’) for the audience of video film lies in its elusiveness as a utopia that heals all from local ills (Dogbe 2002).

Second, just because she is female, Kate also faces gendered erasure from this seemingly ‘modern’ family that she fights so hard to save from ruin. During one family dinner in the middle of the film, Victor, without even considering Kate’s capacities, announces his plan to leave his business to her younger brother, even as he is exasperated by the boy’s lack of ambition and business acumen. Another dimension has to do with the implications of Victor’s recuperation (he faces no sanction for his misdeeds) at the expense of Ivy who is even more silenced at the end of the film. Thus it is apparent that the chances of things being different for a new generation represented by Kate, her groom, and the wounded Effie are equally bleak.
Dress, honor, and circumscribed power in *Dza Gbele*

The video film *Dza Gbele* (Till Death) examines women’s healing/destructive powers through the filter of interethnic ‘othering’ and prejudice. Scripted and produced by Ghanaian filmmaker Hajia Hawa Meizongo, the film features a rare portrait of the lives of those labeled by the dominant southern Ghanaian ethnic groups as ‘others’ – namely people of Sahelian origins, as well as Muslims from northern Ghana. The story is a romance between a Fante taxi driver, Yoosi, and Zadia, a young Hausa woman, set against the backdrop of an afro-beat musical score. The film opens with striking camera shots of Zadia’s graceful bearing as she walks along the dusty urban landscape of the capital, Accra, carrying a headload of luggage. Her dress, a hand-loomed cloth wrapped above her breasts with shoulders left bare, stands in stark contrast to what everyone else in the frame is wearing. Just arrived from her hometown in the north, Zadia asks everyone she encounters for directions to her mother’s (Shetu) and aunt’s home. Both women are itinerant traders in native herbal medicines who live as squatters in an uncompleted house on the margins of the city. Yoosi, the taxi driver, is so smitten by Zadia’s beauty that he offers to take her to her destination free of charge. Despite the fact that communication between the two is a challenge, as Zadia speaks only Hausa while Yoosi speaks only Fante and English, the latter persists in trying to woo her with gifts of bread and rides to the market.

Love aside, Yoosi is unable to accept Zadia’s difference in dress and speech, telling her ‘your dressing is alien to our culture.’ He buys her a European-style dress and proceeds to teach her English – changes that startle Zadia’s mother so much that she tears the ‘new’ clothes off Zadia’s body and warns her not to see Yoosi any more. Likewise, Yoosi’s parents are upset that he is seeing a ‘stranger.’ A thoroughly urbanized second-hand-jeans-and-tube-top-wearing Zadia carries on the illicit romance in defiance of her mother. But this is no simple local version of a Romeo and Juliet narrative. The deeper reasons for Shetu’s vehement opposition are revealed through a sequence of flashbacks that are triggered when she catches Zadia and Yoosi passionately kissing each other one evening. She explains to Zadia that there had been a previous platonic relationship between herself and Yoosi’s father.

In flashback, he comes to her one day to buy herbal medicine to cure his sexual impotency, which medicine she gives him for free only requesting that he return to report its efficacy. Yoosi’s father returns so elated about the wonderful medicine that he tries to rape Shetu. Paradoxically, Shetu does not summon her powers in that instant to punish the rapist but instead converts her pain into an intense hatred for Yoosi’s entire family. Thus Zadia and Yoosi’s defiance sends her storming to the latter’s house to face her old nemesis, raging: ‘warn your son … he has influenced my daughter to change our custom. You see my daughter, she put [sic] on dress and so many things …. If your son come [sic] to my house again, you will see!’
To put distance between the lovebirds, Shetu moves the family to another squatter location far from the city. Yet, she still catches the pair together when she unexpectedly returns home one afternoon. This time she heads straight for a calabash full of a special potion, bursts into Zadia’s room and throws the potion all over Yoosi. Instantly he is transformed into a dog and runs out into the bushes. Zadia runs after the dog calling out Yoosi’s name, and when she finds him she clutches the dog to her bosom only to instantly lose her own eyesight when a residue of the potion gets on her face. With the help of another taxi-driver, the blind Zadia takes her boyfriend-turned-dog to his parents’ house, at which point consultations with a native priestess reveal that only Shetu can undo the original spell that had transformed Yoosi. In the end, after her sister’s and daughter’s pleas, Shetu restores Yoosi’s human body. It is telling that the film closes with Yoosi’s father still suffering no punishment for his past misdeeds.

Dza Gbele’s ambiguous portrait of Shetu’s position is instructive. Her defiance against the normative dress regime signals a choice not to be co-opted into the dominant southern Ghanaian hegemony that insists on erasing her 'ethnic difference' even as her daughter is swayed. More importantly, the powers that Shetu possesses – in this case, the power to heal and to tangibly alter reality – reinforce the conflicting position of women in Ghanaian society and elsewhere in Africa. This is a society that at once claims an enduring ‘history’ of women’s relative empowerment (e.g. Asante queenmothers) and economic independence (e.g. market traders) vis-à-vis men that pre-dated and even survived the patriarchal regimes of the European colonizers. And indeed evidence abounds in empirical, historical, ethnographic, and literary studies on African women’s feats throughout history and well into the present. The resigned ending of the film, as ‘harmony’ is hastily restored, raises questions that the filmmaker ducks. With films such as these being self-financed ventures, were the risks too great to take in view of the imperative to recoup cost and perhaps turn a profit?

Sartorial decadence and moral bankruptcy in *Wasted Years*

*Wasted Years* (2000) falls into a slightly different category from the three films previously discussed, in that it is an in-house production of a Christian ministry – the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries in Lagos, Nigeria – pastored by Helen Ukpabio who also wrote the story and produced the film. The provenance also defines the particular audience and uses for which the film is intended. The story, complete with graphic imagery drawn from the biblical *Revelations*, unfolds as an unequivocal warning about the 'fire and brimstone' hell that awaits those who lead a sinful and, worse still, unrepentant life. Good and evil are distinctly compartmentalized. ‘Good’ means living according to the teachings of neo-evangelical Christian theology, while ‘evil’ refers to all things, practices and beliefs (no exceptions!) dubbed 'traditional' African – namely chieftaincy titles and regalia, polygamy, masquerades, music and dances, diviners, healers, ancestral veneration, libation, etc. To make its point, the film
melodramatically overloads the screen with all the aforementioned ‘paraphernalia’ of the devil in its singular pursuit of the story of Chief Authur. The protagonist, with all his excesses – cars, mansion, wives, shady business dealings, inexplicable sources of wealth, and kaleidoscopic wardrobe – is the typical Faustian villain on both the evangelical Christian and African political landscape. His sin is not so much ascribed to the fact of his wealth (for new-wave prosperity Gospel interpretations and seed-faith evangelical Christian theology encourage Believers to look on wealth favorably). Indeed, he glutonously consumes every speck of resources (material and spiritual), women (including his chief chauffeur’s wife), clothes, and power within his orbit. But, it is his unrepentant dabbling in ‘traditional’ cultural practices, which includes the realm of the occult, that thoroughly dams him to ‘hell.’

In his pursuit of power – the coveted chieftaincy coronation whose acquisition drives every fiber of his being – Chief Authur rapidly slips down the moral ladder. Apart from an insatiable appetite for women and other people’s property, the road to his coronation is paved with fancy billowy agbadas, and business suits whose tailored refinement is inversely matched by the gruesome nature of the murders he commits. He orders his crippled brother, whose condition he thought would put a ‘blight’ on his coronation, to be buried alive. Next, he orders his bodyguards to kill his first wife (when he catches her praying for his salvation), as well as a diviner whom he thinks has double-crossed him, and a former employee, whose head he needs to fulfil a contract with yet another diviner. As desperation sets in, he himself shoots down the Krishna devotee after the needle that was supposed to guarantee him immortality mysteriously melts away. A last trip to yet another diviner earns him an extremely physical encounter with the spiritual forces with which he had become so enamored. In a hilarious scene, a pair of bodiless arms mercilessly beat up Authur outside the diviner’s mud hut in the village, crippling him in the process. At this point, the underlying imagery of cannibalism is turned inside out as Authur’s own immobile body begins to rot away. His wives abandon him, while his ‘loyal’ bodyguards make off with his money (stacked in several plastic bags). Authur’s best friend, Raymond (who is now born-again), comes together with his pastor (played by Helen Ukpabio herself) in a last-ditch effort to offer him salvation through Jesus Christ – which offer he soundly rejects, preferring to rot away in his tattered shorts at the mercy of crawling maggots. An epilogue depicts Authur burning in the biblical version of Hell while at a distance his wife floats solemnly in Heaven. But what is quite endearing about him, even in his condition, is his intact sense of humor, especially when he quips at people he knew from his earthly life.

For an audience that does not subscribe to the fundamentalist beliefs of the new-wave Pentecostal Christian churches, Wasted Years (2000) can be interpreted in myriad ways. Despite its deliberate born-again Christian interpretation of good and evil (associated in the film with all things ‘traditional’ African),11 the story resonates particularly on the issue of the search for self-fulfillment amidst the insecurities of daily existence. Though obviously a caricature, Chief Authur’s dabbling in every spiritual soup-pot, in which he seeks out an
impressive array of healers, diviners, sorcerers, mystics, and Christian pastors, in order to maximize personal success and power, makes him quite an endearing villain. His excesses are so blatant that they cannot be taken literally but rather figuratively. What can easily be identified with are the *reasons* – namely self-preservation, personal advancement, insecurity, fear of mortality, etc. – for the choices he makes when he lands in a moral quandary, rather than the outlandish choices themselves. Similarly, his costume changes – from denim ensembles when he pursues a new girlfriend, to European business suits, to delicately embroidered billowy *agbadas*, to the full chieftaincy regalia, and even the tattered shorts he wears as his flesh rots away in the closing scenes – seem ‘believable.’ African audiences of different social classes and ethnic backgrounds go through such wardrobe changes themselves in ways similar to what Mustafa documents about the fluidity with which consumers in Dakar, Senegal ‘may wear African dress on Fridays, slinky attire for a Saturday evening ball, and jogging suits when they sell goods in the marketplace’ (1998: 30). What prompts a viewer’s ambivalence toward Authur, however, is his ruthlessness, particularly when he transgresses the boundaries of family loyalty and has his own brother killed to pave the way for his chieftaincy coronation.

When Chief Authur brings the masqueraders, diviner, and ‘traditional’ entourage into the church for his chieftaincy coronation, few beyond fundamentalist Christian devotees would see anything contradictory about the practice. While people in many African societies would officially state adherence to one religious denomination or the other, in daily practice people approach religion in a more instrumentalist and syncretic fashion – where a Muslim would still go to a Marabou for divination, a Christian pour libation to the ancestors for protection and harmony, or a traditional religion devotee wear a crucifix pendant to ward off evil.

**Conclusion**

All the four films discussed here traverse different geographical, socio-economic, cultural, narrative, and sartorial terrain. *Wasted Years* and *Dza Gbele* come across as fables in which the plots, characters, and action sequences possess substantial allegorical significance – the emphasis being placed more on overarching philosophical truths than on nuanced portraiture. Thus, Chief Authur’s character is portrayed as the personification of pure evil, even though, in actual interpretation, shades of human complexity can be discerned in his motivations and practices. Similarly, the forbidden romance between Yoosi and Zadia in *Dza Gbele* looms large in the foreground of the action to the extent that not only are the intriguing threads of Shetu’s own multifaceted storyline left to fizzle out, but the characters of Zadia and Yoosi themselves are very thinly sketched. Quite literally, it is *dress* that visually and discursively ‘embodies’ the characters in both films, and simultaneously introduces an economy and proliferation of meanings. As previously discussed,
demarcations in the worlds that Chief Authur inhabits in *Wasted Years* are condensed in the clothing and body supplements of the characters. At the same time, the spatio-temporal juxtaposition of the humans, the spirits, and other entities within the visible frame of the film affirms beliefs (outside the parameters of the film) in the tangible overlapping of those realms of existence.

*A Stab in the Dark* and *Intimate Strangers* fictionally zero in on asymmetrical gender, generational, and economic fault-lines that constitute the fabric of urban (West) African discursive spaces. These spaces are configured through the interaction of circulating popular cultural artifacts (actual pleasure-giving things), fragments of re-worked histories and narratives (‘heard that story before’), inventive play with new experiences and products, as well as the painful reminders of structural constraints at the micro and macro levels such as political and economic marginality, ethnic conflict, cultural and gender repression, and generational gaps (Ahmad 1992). The films certainly offer idealized interpretations of these modernities, not the least heightened by the tantalizing array of dress styles that promise real and vicarious serial pleasures. Yet, framing the multiplicity of fantasy-inducing experiences and identity-altering options are enduring hegemonic structures that gnaw away and sometimes endlessly defer the consummation of those affective desires. As the continent marks time in a frantic search for structural and political direction, African audiences will not give up their visual and sartorial comforts. They await the next video film ‘release!’

**Esi Dogbe** can be contacted at the Department of Pan African Studies, University of Louisville, 437 Strickler Hall, Louisville, Kentucky, 40292, USA. E-mail: esi@louisville.edu

**Notes**

1. What began as a completely *laissez-faire* enterprise has been increasingly brought under the purview of state censorship boards in Ghana and Nigeria whose rules requiring the curtailment of ‘gratuitous’ violence, sex, and ‘immorality’ have influenced the content of films.
2. While exact figures are difficult to ascertain from the film censorship boards of both countries, conservative estimates of films produced in Ghana since 1989 number over 500. By contrast, Nigerian video films in Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and English number in the thousands (Balogun 1998).
3. Yoruba word meaning vicissitudes of daily living that has gained wide currency in the West African region.
4. *Agbada* is the Yoruba term for the popular Hausa formal men’s dress consisting of drawstring pants, long shirt and a flowing embroidered overtunic made from the finest guinea brocades, satin or European laces (Bastian 1996). Despite its Muslim and North African origins, the ensemble has been adopted in many parts of West Africa (including Ghana, Sierra Leone, Benin) as a conscious statement of African pride.
5. Bastian’s description of the loaded meanings that *agbada* dress has acquired deserves quoting at length: ‘The ”Hausa style,” or *agbada* (a Yoruba term), was
taken up by most politicians and businessmen – who abandoned the three-piece, European suit in its favor – as a symbol of national pride and unity after the 1960s civil war. ... The new Nigerian male style of the 1970s, signified by the free-flowing agbada ... was associated with the high life, the art of the deal (which included "kola" or "express," the judicious use of gratuities and bribes), and with sanctimonious public oratory (e.g., president Shagari's "ethical revolution") that covered, like the folds of the agbada overtunic, a multitude of sins' (1996: 105).

6. The suggestion here of instrumentality does not foreclose those abstract sacred dimensions of belief that are not reducible to the profane.

7. The basic kaba, slit, and covercloth ensemble comprises a hip-length (or longer, depending on fashion cycles) blouse (kaba), a long ankle- or mid-calf-length fitted skirt (slit), often with an opening or walk pleat, and a multipurpose two-yard cloth. The ensemble is usually made from locally made or imported wax-printed cloth called ntama.

8. The church wedding in Ghana, especially in urban centers, has decidedly remained associated with the Western wedding dress and ceremony. The reasons for this have to do with the legacy of missionary prohibitions against indigenous cultural symbols during the era of colonialism. Likewise, some contemporary Pentecostal churches frown on those aspects of indigenous culture they purport to be associated with 'demon worship' such as 'idols, local spirits, ancestors, stools and face markings' (Gifford 1995: 108).

9. In his discussion of Christianity in Ghana, Gifford (1998: 92) notes that a preacher is highly regarded if among his spiritual repertoire is the ability to enable a member of his congregation to secure a visa to the USA or some other European country. A 'crusade preacher, in recounting the marvels God has worked through his ministry, frequently ends with: "He [or she] was completely healed and has now gone overseas." This final phrase indicates a special mark of God's favor.'

10. See Gifford (1998), and Meyer (1999) for fascinating discussions about the myriad 'translations' of the Christian concepts of evil and the devil in contemporary African societies.

11. This interpretation echoes a growing thrust of Pentecostal deliverance theology which insists that everything 'done in African culture is to do with demon worship' (Gifford 1998).

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