

[Article] Narrative Structure in West African Dramatic Films: Localization and Globalization



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Introduction

Films about the Bible have long been popular around the globe. One example, the 1979 JESUS film, has been described as the most watched and most translated film in history (Eshleman 2002, 69). Although enjoyed and understood by many, popular biblical films create barriers to understanding in certain contexts, such as parts of West Africa:

The camera zooms in on the shrine as drops of blood appear on it. This confirms that Jesus has presented a prayer of petition to the shrine, which he sealed with a few drops of chicken blood.

This is how some people in northwestern Benin, West Africa, saw and interpreted the scene at the Mount of Olives from the *JESUS Film*. What went wrong? Why didn't they understand that Jesus was praying directly to God, his father? That his agony was so great that his sweat fell like drops of blood? (Merz 2016, 1)

Due to such misunderstandings, there is a growing recognition of the need to conduct cultural appropriateness evaluations of existing Bible-based films before dubbing them into new languages, as well as the need to evaluate preparatory materials, such as scripts, before creating new films. The current evaluation guidance from International Media Services, which is part of SIL International, advises learning to read images and considering how they might be interpreted by the target culture:

You need to constantly and deliberately question how the images work together with the text: What do the images communicate? Do they fit the language spoken alongside them? Does the film content correspond with your prior knowledge of the biblical text? Where are there differences and discrepancies between image and text? Are there things in the images that distract you from the main message? Are there things present in the images that you think shouldn't be there? (Merz 2016, 5)

These questions about image interpretation are critical. Yet equally important is how these images fit together to form an overall narrative structure. Often, West African films' "narratives obey 'rules' that are different from Western narrational procedures" and are "deeply rooted in oral tradition" (Jørholt 2001, 95). Therefore, narrative structure should also be considered during cultural appropriateness evaluations, with questions such as, What types of narrative structures are found in typical feature-length dramas created by people from the intended audience? How do these structures highlight important plot points, characters, or themes? How do narrative structures in films from the intended audience compare or contrast with the narrative structures of biblical films that have been used in the region?

With such questions in mind, in this article I present an analysis of the narrative structures of three West African dramatic films, considering implications for those who create films with biblical content or themes. First, an analysis of the film *Wùlu* shows that the film packages elements of West African narrative structure in a cinematic style that resonates with international audiences. Second, a brief analysis of two biblical films shows that they follow many West African conventions for narrative structure, while straying significantly from other international norms for cinematic production. In all three examples, the filmmakers balanced the need to “take root,” or respect their cultural identity, and “branch out,” or communicate about this identity with the rest of the world (McGuire 1993, 53). When creating films based on biblical stories, filmmakers should balance rooting and branching based on the intended purpose, audience, and reach of their film.

Artistic tradition and community

This research considers the genre of contemporary West African dramatic films. This genre is broad, so I will define the genre and provide some historical context. Then, during the *corpus* section of this paper, I will locate the films that I analyzed within the definition and context. In general, I define dramas as films that are more serious than humorous and include realistic characters navigating real-world events and challenges, such as race, politics, love, or family life. I am considering West Africa as the region of the westernmost part of Africa, specifically the countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte D’Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Although broad, this region has historical, artistic, social, and cultural connections. I believe a broad region is appropriate when considering dramatic film for two reasons. First, ethnic groups often live in areas that span geopolitical boundaries: “Colonial boundaries are still reflected in the modern boundaries between contemporary West African states, cutting across ethnic and cultural lines, often dividing single ethnic groups between two or more states” (ECOWAS 2021). Connections between groups often span countries and other neat categories. Second, dramatic films are often made for a wider audience than simply one ethnic or geopolitical group. They are created for broader distribution.

People groups across West Africa have a rich tradition of storytelling, which began with the griots who have served as gatekeepers of oral history and tradition. Today’s filmmakers continue to morph and shape this practice, building on the genre of postcolonial West African film that emerged in the 1970s. In Nigeria, during the early part of the postcolonial period, typical film content included stories about the lives of the urban poor or recordings of theater productions (Okome 2007, 1–2). By the late 1980s, economic difficulties in West Africa had rendered celluloid film production unaffordable (Merz 2014, 167). Therefore, in Ghana in 1987, creators made the first West African video film; Nigerian filmmakers’ first video production followed two years later (Merz 2014, 167). Eventually, Nollywood emerged as a leading global producer of films with a distinct style. The films include “indigenous content” and “relevant issues,” using “Nigerian narrative techniques” in combination with “Western technology” (Ebewo 2007, 47). Stories often center on themes of “the occult world (juju, black magic, sorcery, ritual murder, witchcraft, etc.), obscenity, prostitution, and ‘money worship’” (Ebewo 2007, 47). Another category of films made in Nigeria is “Hallelujah video films,” which are “religious films created or sponsored by evangelical groups for the propagation of their faith” (Ebewo 2007, 47). Some of these creators have tried to distance themselves from the Nollywood label. For example, Mike Bamiloye, the founder of Mount Zion Ministries, asserted that “he and members of his drama ministry are not Nollywood

artistes” (Akinyoade 2020). He considers his work to be in the category of gospel movies, not Nollywood movies (Akinyoade 2020).

The form of film dramas in West Africa has continued to expand and now includes comedy, historical films, animation, and other types of films. While aspects of West African film have origins elsewhere, the stories remain local:

There is a tangible recognition in the industry that the medium itself is a borrowed form and its utilization is still not at an optimal level. What is stressed time and time again is not the magic of the technology but what it has done for the projection of local stories to local people about their local situations. (Okome 2007, 9)

Methods

This study combined ethnographic approaches with analysis specific to film studies. Concerning ethnography, I focused on the lenses of shape of the event through time, content, and underlying symbolic systems from *Creating Local Arts Together* by Brian Schrag (2013). Specifically, I employed these ethnographically grounded techniques:

- Created a simplified scene analysis, plot summary, and dramatic intensity curve (Schrag 2013, 108)
- Described the films’ plot structures and plot elements (Schrag 2013, 118)
- Described character types, motives, and broad roles (Schrag 2013, 119-120)
- Analyzed existing interviews and conducted a new interview
- Conducted participant observation of the creation of one film

Regarding scene analysis, I followed the approach of the *Yale Film Analysis Guide*. Shot by shot, I described editing, cinematography, sound, and mise-en-scène using vocabulary and approaches from the guide. In total, I analyzed approximately seventy-six shots in this fashion, across three key film scenes. Undergirding the research was a literature review of foundational writing about film studies, articles about biblical films, and works about orality in West African cinema.

Corpus

My corpus was *Wùlu*, a 2016 crime drama set in multiple countries (Coulibaly 2016); *Yidi Baaba*, a contextualized biblical film created in the Gambia (Ige 2018); and *Abomination ou Adoration?*, a film created in Togo (International Media Services 2022).

I chose the first film, *Wùlu*, because of its critical acclaim and inclusion of multiple locations across the region of West Africa in the storyline. I was interested in films made for the region broadly. It is a feature-length film combining conventions of French cinema, such as extensive character development and a serious tone, with similarities to West African stories and Nollywood, such as references to the occult. In the future, analyzing Nollywood films, rather than a film with such notable French influences, could be a useful addition to this research on narrative structures in West African dramatic films.

I chose the other two films because of direct access to the creators and creation process. The films are shorter than *Wùlu* and were created using a fast, participatory process. The director of *Yidi Baaba* explained that

his work was influenced by Christian films from ministries in Nigeria, such as Mount Zion Drama Ministry. Like Mount Zion films, the work is evangelistic and explores themes that are relevant to people's lives (Interview with David Oluseyi Ige 2022). Yet, unlike other filmmakers in Nigeria, Ige relied on what he called "real people," some of whom were unpaid volunteers, rather than a paid staff of actors and actresses (Interview with Ige 2022). The film *Abomination ou Adoration?* builds on the tradition of other Christian films produced in West Africa. It is similar to the other films due to its inclusion of a moral lesson, but it differs because it focuses on instruction for those already in the church, not the propagation of Christianity.

Definitions of narrative

For this analysis, I define narrative as the intentional organization of knowledge according to the standards of a given culture. The definition draws on Toni Morrison's description of narrative as simply "one of the ways in which knowledge is organized" (Morrison in Bordwell et al. 2020, 73). In the Western canon, narrative is considered "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space" (Bordwell et al. 2020, 73). West African stories push back on this definition, particularly on the notion of causality, because their events are not always linked by obvious chains of cause and effect (Jørholt 2001, 104).

Jørholt's observations about West African narratives seem to be true of traditional oral storytelling. Others, however, note that the narratives of West African films differ from traditional story structures in nuanced and complex ways. First, broad sharing of media across the globe has influenced how narratives are shaped in West African films. Their cinema does not "exclude all things European or Western" nor is it in "opposition to them" (Murphy 2000, 241). Rather, Africa and the West are "hybrid entities that influence and modify each other, and this process of exchange applies to cinema" (Murphy 2000, 241). Murphy recognizes that oral stories and traditions have heavily influenced African cinema. At the same time, the limitations of the form and commercial interests have further shaped the griot tradition as it has been adapted to the cinema (Murphy 2000, 245):

it is wrong to assume that African cinema audiences can only understand films that work within the structures of their own oral tradition. For generations now, Africans have been viewing Kung Fu movies and Indian melodramas, although they often respond to these films as though attending an oral performance (jumping up and down, clapping, imitating the actors). The relationship between the paying cinema spectator and a film, and the relationship between listener and storyteller, are vastly different. For example, films cannot engage in a dialogue with members of the audience as happens in a traditional oral performance. Above all, it should not be forgotten that films are commercial enterprises. One must pay to enter the cinema: it is not a "traditional" communal gathering. (Murphy 2000, 245)

Directors offered more personal views on the influences of oral traditions on their works:

For me, studying filmmaking was tied to how I used to tell and listen to stories as a child. Filmmakers certainly continue this tradition. It's an organic continuation, combining the African imagination with cinematography, and making it into a universal story. (Fanta Régina Nacro in "Met Museum" 2020)

Of course, I use the griot's methodology in my filmmaking. But there are various forms of storytelling in our cultures and I try to use all of them. I'm introducing the world to the Sahel—its wealth, its rich culture, its narrative forms, its imaginations unknown to the whole world, and the way we told stories in the form of tales. (Rahmatou Keïta in "Met Museum" 2020)

You take something of your own that is local that God gave you, one of the tangible heritage that God and your ancestors are giving you, and you take it and you promote it . . . and you say, “Hey, listen. We also have a voice. We have a rich cultural heritage. I have consumed yours. Now this is mine.” (Tunde Kelani in “FeemFlix” 2021)

Overall, the literature discusses a merging and blending of global narrative styles, rather than neat categories. Narrative decisions are shaped by broad socioeconomic forces, the artists’ personal and community histories, and desires to tell stories in ways that others around the globe will appreciate.

Case study: *Wùlu*

This merging and blending of global narrative styles is evident in *Wùlu*, a 2016 crime drama directed by Daouda Coulibaly. The film was intended for a broad audience of both West Africans and those in the larger global film community, so a mixture of global influences is present. The movie opens in Bamako, Mali, in June 2007. It follows Ladji, a twenty-year-old, on a quest to make enough money through drug trafficking to free his sister from prostitution. But things do not go according to plan.

Based on summary transcription, and considering the film in total, I identified a cyclical plot structure. Scholars sometimes differ slightly in their definitions of cyclical plot structures. For the sake of clarity, I am using this definition: cyclical plot structures “contain conflicts that are intentionally unresolved. The play ends with characters in the same situation as when the play began” (Schrag 2013, Loc. 3563). Following are the plot elements in *Wùlu*:

1. **Exposition:** The exposition includes two main parts: an exposition of society as a whole and a short introduction of the setting and protagonist. The former part, quoted here, describes the five levels of Bambara society:

In Bambara culture, fraternal societies must train their followers to make them into valuable members of the community. In the Ntomo society, new members must pass through five levels: the lion level teaches a man where he came from; the toad level tells him where he is going; the bird level teaches him who he is; the guinea fowl level considers the place of man in the cosmos; the final level enlightens the member on his place in society. This is the level of the dog. (*Wùlu*)

This was delivered as text on screen with simple illustrations rather than being read by a narrator. The latter part of the exposition introduces the protagonist, Ladji, and the setting, which is Bamako in June 2007.

2. **Initial incident:** Ladji does not receive a promotion from apprentice to bus driver. Therefore, he does not have the money to allow his sister, Ami, to stop working as a prostitute. He looks out over a hill and cries, showing the start of an internal conflict. He takes a job trafficking drugs to earn more money.

3. **Rising action:** The rising action can be divided into three similar journeys and one shorter mission, interspersed with dreams, folktales, flashbacks, and visual motifs of prayer beads, slaughtered meat, water, and of course the animals connoting the five levels of society.
- a. **Journey one:** Ladji and two others transport drugs to Dakar, Senegal, in a meat truck. On their return, they narrowly escape being caught by inspectors. When they arrive in Bamako, they find that the person who gave them the job is dead and that they have a new boss. Ami spends and gives away the money her brother earned from trafficking drugs, motivating him to continue with the criminal work.
 - b. **Journey two:** Ladji and the two others transport drugs to Conakry, Guinea, while working for the new boss. Ladji tells the boss he wants to do this trip “in his own manner.” They return safely and successfully. Ladji and Ami spend the money earned through trafficking. Six months later, they move into a new living space. He visits his boss’s boss, who greets Ladji as “the guy who misses nothing.” The boss’s boss says they are bringing in too much stock and need to deliver more to the North; however, “the desert can be complicated,” so Ladji and his friends will be armed. Ladji and Ami continue to spend money, such as buying a car and a luxury vase.
 - c. **Journey three:** Ladji and the two traveling companions go to Timbuktu, Mali. In the desert, one of the companions is shot in the head. Ladji disposes of the body. Ladji and the other companion return home, where the companion tells a folktale that concludes with the statement, “We’ve been acting like poor, ignorant children.”
 - d. **Journey four:** Ladji and his traveling companion embark on a mission that involves a woman transporting drugs through the Bamako airport. In the end, they are missing one kilo of cocaine, so the boss asks Ladji to kill his friend. Ladji complies. Ladji and Ami begin building a larger house.
4. **Major crisis:** Ladji watches television and learns of an attempted military coup in Guinea. He returns to his boss’s boss to ask for a job but is told it is now too risky to transport drugs due to the coup. Without a job, Ladji realizes that he will run out of money to fund his lifestyle, including his house. Ladji asks for money and begins selling his possessions.
5. **Climax:** Ladji returns home and turns on the television. His sister is with a client. When she is finished, Ladji and his sister begin a tense discussion. She refuses to sell the house and says in French that they will eat stones if needed. She tells Ladji that he is a dog.
- a. **Markers that indicate climax:** The expository social commentary establishes a dramatic premise that centers on a person’s place in the five levels of society, symbolized by animals. The repetition of the symbols at this moment, verbally and visually, points to this as the climax. During Ladji and Ami’s conversation, guinea fowl are heard and seen on the television. They represent a level of society. Ami also calls Ladji a dog, which represents another level of society. Furthermore, the heavy use of point-of-view shots with slight camera movement builds suspense and invites viewers to identify with Ladji. Such point-of-view shots are typically used to create intense suspense and drama, often in thrillers or horror films. Finally, Ami uses French when talking with her brother for parts of this scene. The

language divide suggests a degree of conflict and division between them not present earlier in the film.

6. **Minor crisis:** Ladji embarks on his riskiest job yet, to North Mali. One of his collaborators is the father of his love interest. A soldier unexpectedly stops Ladji and a fellow trafficker at the border on their return and finds their drugs. Yet, the military eventually releases them. They return successfully and as extremely wealthy men.
7. **Falling action:** Ladji is no longer allowed to see his love interest, due to her father forbidding it. Ladji and Ami move to Saly, Senegal.
8. **Ambiguity or non-resolution:** Ladji leaves a party and drives on the street. He drives his vehicle into a truck, seemingly as an act of suicide. The film cuts to a shot of his sister swimming in a pool. Onscreen text describes how the trafficking of cocaine contributed to the collapse of the Malian state in 2012 and the rise of terrorism.
 - a. **Markers that create sense of non-resolution:** A long tracking shot of Ladji driving in a circle has a disorienting effect on viewers. The visual of the circle parallels the circular structure of the plot. Furthermore, the final shots before Ladji drives into the truck are short takes that build suspense rather than leading to a sense of resolution. Finally, the ending commentary text leaves viewers wondering whether Ladji's actions were morally good, in their defense of his sister's honor, or morally corrupt, in their contribution to instability in the region. His sister is left in much the same state as when the film began: with an uncertain financial future and social standing.

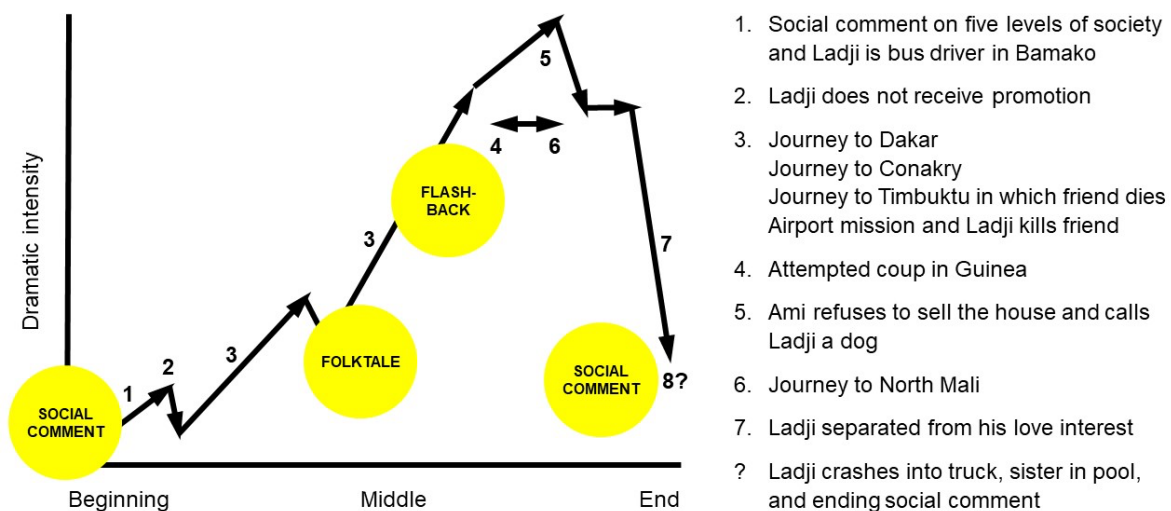


Figure 1. Plot summary of Wùlu.

Connections with West African oral storytelling

The narrative structure shows multiple connections with the hallmarks of West African oral storytelling as identified by Jørholt (2001):

- **Absence of closure (Jørholt 2001, 103–104):** Overall, the story ends with as many questions as answers. Does Ami know her brother committed suicide? Without her brother's income, will she be able to continue to afford her lifestyle or will she return to prostitution? Were Ladji's actions a moral obligation to his sister or greedy crimes? What responsibility do the actions of this family have for the rise of political instability and terror in the region? Although the characters do not end in exactly the same place they began, they face similar problems at the conclusion, and the story lacks a clear resolution.
- **Reiteration of a central theme, sometimes through music and movement performances (Jørholt 2001, 105–106):** The reiteration throughout the narrative of the animals described in the exposition, especially referencing them during the climactic moment, encourages the audience to reflect on social structure as a central theme. The repetition of music during the portions of beginning and ending social commentary also emphasizes social structure as a theme.
- **Group focus rather than individual focus (cosmodrama rather than psychodrama) (Jørholt 2001, 106):** Although the film centers on the place of the characters in society rather than on their individual lives, viewers still gain insight into their interior lives, goals, and motivations, such as when Ladji sheds a tear before accepting his first journey and later contorts his face before crashing his vehicle.
- **Central conflict involving “complementary opposites” rather than a clear winner (Jørholt 2001, 107):** Ladji chooses between allowing his sister to be dishonored and criminal activity. There is no clear winner in this match.
- **Deeper symbolic associations that represent invisible forces (Jørholt 2001, 108):** One notable symbolic association representing invisible forces is prayer beads. They are present near the rearview mirrors of the vehicles that Ladji takes for his drug trafficking journeys with his companions. The beads are wrapped around one companion's wrist as Ladji kills him. Ladji removes them from his friend's wrist as he buries him. Ladji touches them and has a flashback of his friend at a party. He touches them again before taking his final drive at the end of the film. The beads again connect Ladji with his deceased friend in a supernatural way. Water, as a symbol of washing, purity, and protection, is also present at various moments throughout the film.

The other two main hallmarks of West African oral storytelling narrative structure identified by Jørholt are absent or minimally present in *Wùlu*:

- **Gaps of information (Jørholt 2001, 103):** The story includes most information needed to draw linear connections between events. Although there are time gaps, they are not confusing and are always clearly labeled.
- **“Parallelisms, formulaic repetitions, and allegorical comparisons rather than . . . clear chains of causes and effects” (Jørholt 2001, 105):** The actions seem linked by clear chains of cause and effect,

with each event leading to the next. The spending of money after each journey creates a need for Ladji to take increasingly risky and lucrative jobs. The jobs grow in intensity and importance. Therefore, this quality does not seem present. Thematic repetitions work together with chains of causes and effect to unite the narrative. They are not the only structure holding the narrative together.

Overall, there are clear connections and nuanced differences between the *Wùlu* film and the hallmarks of narrative structure in West African storytelling. This suggests that globalization has influenced artistic choices in the genre, as well as that the form is malleable based on intended audiences.

Character motivations: A hero constrained

Now that we have considered West African oral stories broadly, we will look more deeply at Mande traditions. The motivations of the protagonist Ladji, as well as the series of conflicts and resolutions that drive the plot, connect with Mande epics.

The Mande, united by their use of mutually intelligible dialects of the Mandekan language, inhabit a region of the West African savannah from the Gambian coast to central Burkina Faso, as well as from the south of Mauritania through Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (McGuire 1993, 37). They include multiple people groups, such as the Bambara, who feature in *Wùlu* (McGuire 1993, 37). Regarding verbal arts among the Mande, griots play a primary role. They function as historians and social mediators in Mande society (Jansen 2000, xi). They produce art in many genres, including epic poems, which exhibit “poetic language, heroic content, great length, multigeneric qualities, legendary belief structure, multifunctionality, and traditional transmission” (Nelson 2018, 3, paraphrasing Johnson 1992, 7–11). Specifically, the Sunjata epic recounts how a hero founded the Malian empire in the thirteenth century. So influential is Sunjata that diverse arts in contemporary Mande society explore its themes, arts such as young men’s masquerades (Arnoldi 2000, 74), literature (McGuire 1993, 43), and, as we consider here, dramatic films.

Broadly, the themes of Mande stories include “the nature of knowledge and power, the relationship of the individual to the group, and the path to gaining one’s name” (Arnoldi 2000, 74). A hunter’s journey to win his name, or reputation, is the central goal of many Mande stories. This journey often involves mastering the occult, as well as studying animals to win favor from spirits and gain the ability to “control the energy released by the animal or person at death” (Arnoldi 2000, 67). Eventually, by “surpassing the deeds of one’s father and ancestors,” a hunter can “overcome tradition” and earn his “name or reputation” (Arnoldi 2000, 69). The hunter’s journey, the *dalimasigi*, involves wandering to achieve this reputation. Traditionally, the hunter wandered in the wild. Now, hunters can wander in a setting that is quite different. “Today people regard young men’s long-distance labor migrations as a kind of *dalimasigi*, or heroic voyage” (Arnoldi 2000, 70). Arnoldi further described this idea as it pertains to masquerades:

Many newer characters highlight particular aspects of the human condition and speak to the nature of poverty, to domestic relations focusing on marriage and gender relationships, and on the nature of power and the relationship of the individual to the state. . . . Over the last half of the twentieth century, at the same time that the actual area of uncultivated land has constricted and the numbers of hunters have diminished, the definition of the bush and of the hero have been extended to other arenas of endeavor. The ethos of the hunter hero, his knowledge, assertiveness, and daring that is captured and celebrated in the great Mande epics still has an immediacy for young men in Mali today. (Arnoldi 2000, 74)

Ladji's voyages, too, can be seen as contemporary explorations of the masterly Mande epics. Much like heroes in the masquerades, which are also shaped by the epics, his motive is to earn a name and reputation. In this instance, that involves removing his sister from a life of prostitution and rescuing both of them from poverty. His voyage takes place not in the bush but in the urban sphere. Along the way, he exhibits the hunter's ethos of "knowledge, assertiveness, and daring" (Arnoldi 2000, 74). He asserts himself from the beginning of the story, persisting in asking for a drug trafficking job after the boss initially refuses. Later, he insists on doing a job "his own way," instead of simply taking orders from a boss. Ultimately, knowledge allows him to survive incidents that left his other two traveling companions dead. He exhibits daring in each journey, culminating with a drug trafficking journey so risky that another man likens it to a hand of poker, all set against a backdrop of political instability. His characterization touches on the archetype of the Mande epic hero. Yet he is individualized. He eventually subverts the idea of the Mande hero, when we consider the forces that govern Mande epics.

Undergirding the Mande epics and the hero's journey are two complementary forces. Although complex, they have been summarized as "the intersection of two axes: the axis of individuality, referred to as *fadenya* 'father-childness,' and the axis of group affiliation, referred to as *badenya* 'mother-childness'" (McGuire 2000, 39, quoting Bird and Kendall 1980, 14). Essentially, to earn a reputation, a young man must harness *fadenya* actions to surpass the deeds of his peer group, and perhaps his ancestors or others; yet he cannot stray too far outside the bounds of *badenya* group affiliation (McGuire 1993, 40). The *badenya* constrains his *fadenya*, and any great actions of an individual eventually become part of the broader *badenya* group affiliation (McGuire 1993, 40).

In *Wùlu*, Ladji tries to operate within the group sphere by earning a respectable job. Once rejected, he begins to rely more heavily on *fadenya* actions that defy social affiliations and group norms in one sense, yet strengthen his *badenya* association with his sister. Throughout the film, his actions exhibit more and more *fadenya* energy, heavily disrupting group norms, such as when he kills a traveling companion. Close to the end of the film, despite Ladji's money and success, his love interest's father blocks him from marrying his daughter, preventing him from integrating his actions back into society. With his *fadenya* and *badenya* heavily out of balance, he chooses death. When considering his *badenya* legacy, the film comments on the connection of his actions with the collapse of the state. Overall, Ladji embarks on the hero's journey, but rather than completing it, he subverts it and ultimately collapses, as restrained by social group affiliation. But did society leave him any viable options other than the path of crime to defend his family's honor? The film thus participates in the ongoing discourse about the nature of heroes, touching on themes of the Sunjata epic. *Wùlu* presents the constraints and possibilities of young "hunters" and heroes in today's world.

Film as rooted and branched media

The packaging of Mande themes and worldview in a Western medium is similar to the "take root . . . and branch out" concept identified in literature that retells aspects of Mande epics (McGuire 1993, 53):

one acknowledges in *Le Boucher de Kouta* the realization of Badian's call for Malian literature to simultaneously take root and branch out, to affirm its identity as different while at the same time participating in a dialogue with the rest of the world, as a modern nation. This gesture is affirmed by the

fact that Diabate has chosen to express his ideas in an originally Western medium, and is able to simultaneously address readers within and without the cultural bounds of his writing. (McGuire 1993, 53)

Wùlu is driven by the characterization and concepts of conflict at the heart of the Mande epics. Therefore, it is deeply rooted. The style of cinematography and the medium itself, however, are from elsewhere. Therefore, the film is broadly branched and can enter into conversations with the rest of the world.

Biblical films: To root or to branch out?

What about biblical films? How do they balance rooting and branching out? In response to this question, let us consider two examples of people creating biblical films today. The first example is from David Oluseyi Ige, a musician, filmmaker, and storyteller who lives in the Gambia and is from Nigeria. Ige blends the film medium with an awareness of how long oral stories (not short fables or proverbs) are often told in his context. In an interview, he explained that people gather and sit around a storyteller. The storyteller begins with an introduction. Throughout the event, the storyteller may lead songs, which tell an aspect of the story, in the form of call and response. The teller ends the story with a moral and asks the audience, “What did you learn from the story?” The audience and the performer can then dialogue.

To develop the film *Yidi Baaba (The Father’s Heart)* for Fula people, David held discussions with Fula Christians to identify the wider ethnolinguistic community’s challenges and hopes. David normally defines communities along ethnolinguistic lines. The Fula Christians identified the challenges of forgiveness, as well as issues related to cattle inheritance. To address these challenges, they then chose the biblical story of the prodigal son. Rather than working with professional actors and actresses and writing a script, David used a process of scenario acting, in which dialogue was improvised during each scene but with a representational style. The actors and actresses represented the characters from the biblical story as if they were experiencing similar events in their contemporary Fula society. They did not memorize a script. When filming, the director asked actors and actresses to include local proverbs that related to the story in their performances. As the dialogue was specific to the community and reflected real life, so the props, costumes, and settings were also realistic to the community.

In this case, David and the community decided to tell the story in a climactic fashion. The story of the prodigal son may be considered either climactic or cyclical, depending on the point of view of the character (Petersen 2019, 15). David considers the moment of feeding pigs as the peak of the story’s conflict, because Islam forbids Fula people from working with pigs. For a Fula, such as the main character, to do so shows that he is experiencing an intense crisis. In the film, the pig owner speaks Wolof, because Wolof people can rear pigs, unlike the Fula.

At the time of the interview, David was working with another community on a story that is original, not a retelling of a Bible story. For this, they chose a more cyclical structure, included dreams, and repeated variations on the theme of the hero defeating the strong man. This structure is less typical in American and European dramatic films but includes many of the hallmarks of West African oral storytelling discussed earlier. David also considered how audiences could participate with these films. Part of showing the film could be a pastor or evangelist providing information and asking questions at the end, similar to the way a local storyteller interacts with the audience at the opening and closing of oral stories.

Another example of a more rooted approach to filmmaking is the short film *Abomination ou Adoration?*, which was created in Togo during a media training workshop through International Media Services. I observed the oral discussion in which the film topic was identified and the narrative was structured. I then participated as an audio technician in the filming of the second scene and edited the audio for this scene. The entire working process was done primarily orally and used nonprofessional camera people, actors, and actresses. It followed a



Figure 2. Recording scene 2 of *Abomination ou Adoration?* (Photos by Andreas Ernst). Top: Camera one perspective. Middle: Camera two perspective. Bottom: Beninese scene director, working with the actors.

method of oral scripting that Andreas Ernst describes in *Voices in Action* (Ernst 2016, 65–67). A group of approximately twenty men and women primarily from Togo and Benin began discussing themes that would relate to the community of Christians in Togo and Benin. They chose the theme of which languages and instruments should be used in church worship. A facilitator guided the discussion, asking people about experiences they had related to this theme. The facilitator showed a diagram of a climactic plot and asked people to structure the story around it. Nevertheless, participants tried to add nuance to the central conflict. Their storyline initially included one older character who advocated for “traditional” music, but the group soon added a second younger character of the same mindset. This showed that the conflict related to music is more than a generational divide. The resolution of the narrative was not a choice between “traditional” music or English music in church, but a worship song that included multiple languages and styles. Although participants were given a climactic narrative structure, they modified it to be more nuanced and revolve around complementary opposites rather than a dichotomy of good and bad. Once the overall narrative structure was agreed upon, different groups of people volunteered to direct and record each of the five scenes. In our group, we created a word-for-word script based on the scene, yet the actors were not shown the script until the time of the shoot. They used it as a loose guideline rather than a memorized text.

In both films, the style of scenario acting rather than scripted memorization limited shooting possibilities. It was unclear exactly what actors and actresses would do, so flexible camera floorplans were needed. David, the director of *Yidi Baaba*, handled this challenge by shooting with two to three cameras. His team used one camera to film a wide shot that captured the scene overall, as well as other cameras to film each principal actor. This allowed him to cut between camera takes and show the most interesting parts in the final edit. In our scene, we used one camera to film a wide shot, one camera to take close-ups and inserts of one group of actors, and a third to take close-ups and inserts of others. Nevertheless, camera people did not follow this plan closely but adjusted their shooting during the filming according to the actors’ improvisations. The unstructured planning made it difficult to achieve more creative or technical shots, such as the circular tracking shot found in the closing sequence of *Wùlu*. This type of shot would have required a bit more planning and coordination of location and actor movements than what I experienced on set. Our film also showed variations in style between scenes, as different groups oversaw the direction of those different scenes. In both cases, filming was completed relatively quickly. In David’s case, it took two days for a thirty-minute final product; in my case, it also took about two days for thirty minutes.

Overall, the process used in David’s films, and the one in which I participated, was useful in creating films quickly and in a more localized style. It allowed for fruitful discussions with community members and effective work with nonprofessionals in a short time with limited funds. While facilitators steered the product toward one narrative structure, they could instead have posed questions or considered analysis to create a more localized narrative structure to accompany the localized themes. Nevertheless, the approach in these two examples also limited options for cinematography and editing in the ways described. This caused the films to lack some of the creative conventions typical of the dramatic film genre in other countries. The two projects seem to be a cross between film and participatory theater genres, rather than fitting neatly into the category of dramatic films. Some audiences accustomed to the standard conventions of West African, American, European, or other dramatic films might find the films created through the participatory process less interesting, and as a result the films may contribute less to broader global conversations. That is not to say the films will not work cross-culturally; David’s film, for example, has also been shown in Mauritania with great success. In general, however,

the films would not be as flexible to be used across regions. They would not be able to branch as widely as other films that more closely follow genre standards.

Conclusion

The film *Wulu* packages West African narrative structure in a way that appeals to people of many cultures. Much like literature about Mande epics, it affirms the Mande cultural identity and participates in broad global conversations through the use of a medium that began in the West (McGuire 1993, 53). Films such as *Abomination ou Adoration?* and *Yidi Baaba* blend elements of West African narrative with highly localized production and filming styles that deeply involved small communities. They strongly affirm local cultural identity because their makers extensively involved local communities in the creative process. Yet their adaptation of the film medium outside of genre standards limits appeal beyond small, community audiences and thereby also limits participation in conversations outside of these communities.

To root or to branch out? Which approach should biblical films take? It depends on the intended audience and objective of the film. Taking a cue from the narrative structures found in West Africa, it would be wise to consider rooting and branching not as an either/or decision but as two complementary concepts. They are both necessary at times in creating biblical films. One film creator may want a broad reach to bring awareness of a particular community to a large international audience or encourage dialogue between multiple groups; this creator could take a branched approach. Another may want a smaller reach to deeply affirm the identity of one community; this creator might focus on rooting. As one community wrestles deeply with biblical themes through rooted films, they may in turn want to create something that reaches other communities more broadly. Or one creator may start with a broadly branched film and then follow by engaging communities interested in the more generic film with smaller, participatory projects. The roots and branches can nourish and support each other.

Decisions about narrative structure clearly involve much more than simply audience understanding. The choice of narrative structure does not always even affect audience understanding of or interest in a film, because many audiences are used to consuming global media. The choice does, however, affect a film's appropriateness for and level of influence on an audience. Just as many people can understand biblical truths communicated in various languages, they can grasp films that follow different grammars from other cultures; yet certain grammars may be less effective in communicating or less interesting to a particular audience (Dye and Hatcher 2014, 9). Relevance theory serves to "remind us that too much reading/hearing effort reduces the effectiveness of a passage" (Dye and Hatcher 2014, 5). The discussion of localization and globalization of biblical films should not center on whether people can or cannot understand a biblical film on a base level but on the degree to which they understand it accurately and how to reduce the effort required for them to understand the message. If a biblical film creator's desire is deep influence on the worldview level, even against the backdrop of globalization, it would be wise to take a rooted approach.

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