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“Bissauwood”: devising alternative modes of production and distribution

“Bissauwood”: arriscando modos de produção e distribuição alternativos

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Abstract

Vernacular film and audiovisual productions in Guinea-Bissau, going viral among its inhabitants, are growing exponentially. These outputs, widely available via informal screenings or shared on Internet channels, portray ordinary events to achieve thousands of views inside the country and throughout its diasporas in Europe. Unveiling forms of social invisibility, these films constitute valuable resources for studying the ironies and paradoxes of Guinea-Bissau's contemporary history, especially for gender issues. Simultaneously, their narratives, modes of production and distribution strategies might contribute to the discussion on decolonizing cinema.

Keywords

vernacular film | Guinea-Bissau | gender issues | decolonizing cinema

Resumo

A produção cinematográfica e audiovisual vernacular na Guiné-Bissau, viral entre os seus habitantes, está a crescer exponencialmente. Exibidos em sessões informais de

cinema ou partilhados em canais da internet, estas obras que ilustram situações quotidianas, alcançam milhares de espectadores quer no país, quer nas suas diásporas na Europa. Revelando formas de invisibilidade social, estes filmes constituem fontes valiosas para estudar as ironias e os paradoxos da história contemporânea da Guiné-Bissau, principalmente no que concerne as questões de género. Paralelamente, as narrativas fílmicas, modos de produção e estratégias de distribuição podem contribuir para a discussão sobre a descolonização do cinema.

cinema vernacular | Guiné-Bissau | questões de género | descolonizar o cinema

Palavras-chave

Introduction

I asked Noel Djassi when he had directed his first film, and he told me it was ten years ago, in 2011, in the Bairro Militar [Military District] of Bissau, Guinea-Bissau's capital. We were at his home, in Queluz, on the outskirts of Lisbon, Portugal¹. He explained how his father had sent him a Samsung cell phone from Portugal — where he was living at the time — to Bissau. This was the device he used to shoot his first “comedy play” [“teatro comédia”]². The narrative revolved around a plot of debts and collections and presented some of the technical issues common to amateur productions. For instance, the actor who played the debt collector also played a burglar. As they created the story while shooting, the actors played characters as needed. Later, they would edit the sequences in a cybercafé. They were a group of friends who had watched the films of Mário Oliveira (Barudju), a Guinean actor and director who will feature heavily throughout this paper and sought to make similar movies.

Stories such as this took place in Bissau, and across the many other cities on the African continent where access to video equipment was formerly extremely scarce. Hence, in this context, recourse to cell phones played a role that reached beyond communication³. This was also simultaneous to other digital technologies becoming more accessible — computers, photo and video cameras — although not specifically designed

¹ I met Noel Djassi while working as a sound operator on the production *Éramos 3 por 4*; Camala, Etivaldo (dir). 2022. *Éramos 3 por 4* (Portugal).

² This represents a common expression to refer to short plays, somewhat improvised and always comical, which take place in settings such as weddings, funerals, among other celebrations.

³ Achille Mbembe argues that, for those living on the African continent, the cell phone constitutes far more than an everyday object, having driven numerous and fast changes in the social, political, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions Cf. (Mbembe 2021, 92-93).

for these contexts, they became “inserted” into different “cultural matrices” (Mbembe 2021, 94), resulting in surprising combinations (Larkin 1997). Digital has made possible the production of films with little or no budgets, featuring non-professional actors, that then circulate widely on social media and the Internet, and that the most canonical African film scholars tend not to include in their analytical frameworks (Diawara 1992, Ukadike 1994).

However, these movies reach a surprising number of viewers, especially when compared with also freely available professional productions. Due to the lack of local distribution, in Guinea-Bissau many are unaware of works by their most internationally acclaimed filmmakers, such as Flora Gomes. Nevertheless, they are avid consumers of these non-professional films with their ground-breaking means of informal distribution. The main driver of this interest probably interlinks with how they share narratives which local viewers identify with as illustrated by my first contact with these movies (cf. Pina 2014).

On May 2015, I was undertaking research for my PhD thesis in a small village called Unal in southern Guinea-Bissau (Laranjeiro 2021). It still has neither electricity nor running water and is one hour away, by car, along a dirt road, from the nearest urban center, a small town called Buba. Only Seguna that had a smartphone in a reality that was to become very different in just a few years. The communication advantages triggered by the Internet turned the purchase of these phones into a priority (Porter et al. 2016, Deen-Swaray 2016, Evans 2018, Kanyam, Kostandini, and Ferreira 2017).

At that point, I was filming alone. I often thought about how to make this process more collaborative and so I invited some young men to film with me (Rose 2016). Quickly, they came up with a scenario for a “comedy play”: one of them would play an old man, and the other a youngster with whom he would clash; while the third would play a soldier from the Liberation Struggle who had lost his memory. In order to better enlighten me on how to shoot them, Seguna showed me a movie on his cell phone. We gathered around him, a group of six or eight, to watch the film. I soon realized I was the only one who had not seen it before. All of them laughed at the jokes in advance, and many already knew sections of the dialogue by heart.

The movie was called *Lei di Tabanca* [Village Law] (2015) and was hugely popular at the time. Performed in Guinean creole, the film features a group of Balanta youth, the same ethnic-linguistic group with whom Unal’s residents identify. The allusion to ethnic identity is recognizable because the movie specifically takes place in a fictional *tabanca* [cr. village] called Balanta.

Months later, I was visited in Bissau by film historian Paulo Cunha. On the street, we were approached by a street vendor of pirated DVDs. His range spanned North American action films, Indian romantic movies, and comedies directed by young Guineans. On talking to him, we realized that a significant part of the Guinean comedies for sale were not made in Guinea-Bissau but rather by Guineans in the diaspora. Later, in

“African shops” in Portugal, we would find out that one of the products imported from Guinea-Bissau was precisely pirate DVDs of Guinean comedy.

These films are made by young amateurs, groups of friends, youth associations in Bissau and by young Guineans in the diaspora, particularly in Europe. These movies have never been screened in film festivals or even in any conventional movie theatre, circulate online, obtain a surprising number of views when compared to movies resulting from major productions made in the same countries, and also freely accessible. Through comments and shares, these films create communities of viewers that serve to convey their expectations for yet to be made movies.

Hence, these films not only create transnational visual flows, but their respective communities of viewers also challenge the cultural paradigm according to which audiovisual products are usually “extraverted” from Europe or the United States to countries on the African continent (Hountondji 2009). Travelling between Guinea-Bissau and its diasporas, these movies may be perceived as commodities (Appadurai 1988) that, through transnational flows (Appadurai 1996), circulate without resorting to any centralized distribution system (Scott 2008). It is therefore relevant to consider the hypothesis that these movies and their respective audiences participate in an alternative film production process still overlooked by film studies.

This form of filmmaking extrapolates the limits of conventional cinema, presenting similarities with other audiovisual products, such as music videos, videogames, soap operas or TV series. Its modes of production, on the other hand, are very representative of the context from which emerge. With its origins in the traditional “comedy plays”, the ability to record combined with the capacities to share and reproduce such contents. “Teleplays” [“Teleteatros”] was the name attributed to these first film productions that interweave theatre with television and are mostly performed by amateur theatre groups.

Due to all these characteristics, I choose to designate these as vernacular films even while they might also could be called “popular films”, “home-made films”, “do-it-yourself films” or “non-theatrical cinema”. All these titles were applied in studies approaching similar phenomena (Salazkina and Fibla 2021). However, the diversity and volubility of these movies ensure they do not fit fully into any of these labels in keeping with the importance of analysing this very peculiar form of filmmaking that challenges most conventional approaches to African cinema (Mirzoeff 2011, Shohat and Stam 2014).

In this paper, I analyze five vernacular film productions, all made in Guinea-Bissau but also available in diasporas throughout Europe, and discuss their narratives, modes of production and distribution strategies. This analysis entails a threefold approach. First, I describe the narratives of these films in order to unveil their main topics and themes and how they may contribute to the study of Guinea-Bissau’s contemporary history, especially on gender issues. Secondly, I focus on how their modes of production are successfully overcoming the usual constraints of African cinema. Finally, I convey

how the popularity of these movies, their directors, and actors ironically thwarts the opportunity for an economically sustainable production chain.

Filmmaking in Guinea-Bissau: limits, challenges, and potential

The vernacular film emerged in Guinea-Bissau within a socioeconomic context that had made regular professional film production virtually impossible throughout decades, (Cunha and Laranjeiro 2020, 2016).

Guinea-Bissau is a small country on the west coast of Africa, which became independent in 1973 after eleven years of armed struggle against Portuguese colonial rule. Unfortunately, the end of the war brought neither peace nor stability to Guinea-Bissau. Six years after its independence, the first coup d'état took place leading to Guinea-Bissau separating from Cape Verde, a country with which it had established a strategic binational alliance during the independence process (the Liberation Struggle). In 1998/99, the country was ravished by a bitter civil war and, in 2003 and in 2012, there were further coups d'état. Added to this background are the several failed coup attempts, followed by political assassinations, which serve to feed the spectre of a return to warfare.

This political instability inhibited any scope for economic prosperity. Government strategies led to unchecked external dependence, progressive decreases in food production, and the constant threat of economic collapse. Rampant levels of political corruption worsened these factors still further, and, following connections between the army and international drug trafficking networks, several authors have criticized the labels conferred on the Guinean state, including “fragile” (Forrest 2003), “failed” (Gruffydd Jones 2013), and even a “Narco-State” (Chabal and Green 2016).

Within this context, the activities of the National Film Institute have only ever been rather meagre and sporadic. Founded in 1978, the “Instituto Nacional de Cinema” (Portuguese acronym INC hereafter), and, championed by Flora Gomes, Sana Na N’Hada, José Bolama, and Josefina Crato⁴, took its inspiration in its early years from the eponymous *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC) [Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry]⁵. The institution strove to grant official status to the work of these four filmmakers, including producing *Actualidades*⁶ as well as the feature film *Cabral’s Return* [O Regresso de Cabral] (1976). On the verge of beginning filming of *Guiné-Bissau: Seis Anos Depois* [Guinea-Bissau: Six Years Later]⁷, the

⁴ These four Guinean directors studied filmmaking in Cuba during the Liberation Struggle (1968-1973).

⁵ According to the respective law, the political power acknowledged cinema as “the most effective means of massive ideological dissemination, able to respond to the fundamental needs of education, communication, and sociocultural development of the popular masses” (Decree No. 10/78 of March 30).

⁶ A series of short films, which presented current news in areas such as politics, sports, culture, the economy, etcetera. They usually formed part of a screening program and shown prior to a feature film. They were privileged instruments of ideological propaganda and particularly popular in Cuba with the *Noticiero Latino-Americano* ICAIC and also in Mozambique with the *Kuxa Kanena*.

⁷ The remaining images of this film project were recently digitized by Filipa César’s collective project *Luta Ca Caba Inda*. Cf. (César 2012).

INC's activities were interrupted by the 1980 coup d'état. Only Sana Na N'Hada remained linked to the institution, collaborating with local productions and international co-productions until the late 1990s.

After a decade and a half of inactivity, the INC was relaunched in September 2003. As of 2004, following the 1^o *Encontro Nacional de Cinema* [1st National Film Meeting], there was a significant attempt to boost its revival, attributing the institution its own bylaws and an Organic Law. It was then renamed the *Instituto Nacional do Cinema e Audiovisual* (INCA) [National Film and Audiovisual Institute]. However, it remained lacking in any state funding that might enable financial support for film production (Cunha and Laranjeiro 2016).

Thanks to foreign partnerships, Flora Gomes and Sana Na N'Hada directed movies that received worldwide acclaim, were selected for important international film festivals, thus taking the pioneering steps in Guinean film history. In addition, other Guinean filmmakers, whether living in Guinea-Bissau or in Europe, have come to make movies with an international reach, among whom we may highlight Domingos Sanca, Vanessa Fernandes, Filipe Henriques, Adulai Jamanca, Suleiman Biá, and Welket Bungué.

It must be stressed the country's political and economic instability coexists with an admirable ability to maintain the social order outside of circles with access to state power and resources (Roque 2016b, 291). In keeping with the argument that the major political transformations take place in areas beyond the state, Lorenzo Bordonaro defends the "irrelevance" of the state over its "collapse" (Bordonaro 2009, 36-37). A great example arises from the introduction of new crops by rural communities, such as cashews, with extremely significant impacts on the country's economy whilst still within a context of major political instability (Havik 2016, 79).

Similarly, the most significant proportion of Guinea-Bissau's film and audiovisual production is taking place through civil society structures: youth associations, community TV⁸, *bankadas*⁹, amateur theatre groups, and even an unexpected garage workshop — *Máquina Motor* [Motor Machine] — where the workers also make movies¹⁰.

While digital enabled the explosion of Guinean vernacular film, the first productions were made on video, and there must be due acknowledgement of how their modes of production were indebted to Nollywood, a film movement that emerged in Nigeria during the 1990s (Jedlowski et al. 2013, Musa 2019, Haynes 2016). Filmed on video, edited on personal computers, and reproduced on cassettes and discs, these movies connected

⁸ Examples include TV Klelé, TV Bagabunda, and TV Massar. TV Klelé produced the movie *Tapioca, fonte de nutrição e economia familiar* [Cassava: Nutrition Source and Benefit to our Household Economy] (2013), an award winner at the International Agrofilm Festival, in Slovenia.

⁹ Informal groups, often mixed, but mostly male, through which activities are organized, from parties and picnics to the provision of security services, as was the case for years in the Military District when there was no police squad in the neighborhood Cf. (Roque 2016a, 91). Henrik Vigh dubbed the *bankadas* the "parliament of the poor" Cf (Vigh 2006, 146-148).

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssn6Y8si6ls> Most recently accessed on: 12/24/2021.

Nigeria with its diasporas. If Nollywood's success was due to its ability to interpret its audiences' fears, dreams, and expectations, its modes of production and distribution were essential in making it accessible to the most disadvantaged social classes (Krings and Okome 2013, 1). Thirty years later, Nollywood has become an established film economy, which launched actors and actresses that became national and international stars (Tsika 2015) and inspired the replication of its same modes of production in other countries, nurturing similar film phenomena, such as Wakaliwood (Larsen and Namatovu 2020). The growing number of vernacular films produced in Guinea-Bissau, or abroad by Guineans, albeit timidly, is fostering a film movement that we might dare call Bissauwood.

Sweeping narratives, successful modes of production, and failed distribution strategies

Whatever the difficulties in attributing original authorship to the film movement we dare call Bissauwood, there is a central figure in this universe. His name is Mário de Oliveira but is commonly called *Barudju*, the name of the character he played in *Barafunda* [Turmoil] (2006) and the first movie he directed. In interviews with younger filmmakers, they all recall this movie quite well. As previously mentioned, after watching it, Noel Djassi made a similar film with his friends¹¹. Nelca Lopez remembers watching *Barafunda* countless times and knowing all the dialogue by heart¹². This movie had such an impact on Axy Demba that he proposes its remaking with better equipment and a professional crew¹³.

When, in 2019, I looked for Mário de Oliveira in Bissau, I was told he had emigrated to Portugal. There, he made a couple of small comedies — *Dudu de Pendão & Barudju* (2020), *Barudju Mavi Nega Far Rim Não Teatro* (2020), and *Barudju vs Clara de Sabura Barcu Rabida Tio Cu Subrinha* (2021) — which I found on the YouTube channel of Em Man, who had been his cinematographer. Em Man has recently emigrated to Portugal, where he works as a truck driver while planning to move to Switzerland, where he believes he will make more money. In parallel with his job, he maintains a video and music studio in Rinchoa, in the Mem Martins Municipality, on the outskirts of Lisbon. He is a hip-hop musician, music video director and a master of the algorithm. His use of YouTube is as amateurish as it is entrepreneurial (Burgess and Green 2009, 89). Through his recaps of football matches, he secures enough views on his page for him to make money for the music and audiovisual contents he is dedicated to¹⁴. Mário de Oliveira, on the other hand, did not manage to make any financial gain from his film work. The partnerships he invested in failed, and he today works at a factory in Caldas da Rainha, in Portugal¹⁵.

¹¹ Interview with Noel Djassi by Catarina Laranjeiro (Queluz, 12/8/2021).

¹² Interview with Nelca Lopez by Catarina Laranjeiro (Barreiro, 02/12/2022).

¹³ Interview with Axy Demba by Catarina Laranjeiro (Cacém, 05/15/2022).

¹⁴ Interview with Em Man by Catarina Laranjeiro (Rinchoa, 11/6/2021).

¹⁵ Interview with Mário de Oliveira by Catarina Laranjeiro (Caldas da Rainha, 01/15/2022).

His first movie *Barafunda* tells the story of a former combatant in the Liberation Struggle, who sees the betrayal of the ideals of independence and is overcome by feelings of hopelessness that drive him to madness. He enters a spiral of debt and collections, and other misfortunes befall him. He is robbed in his house and cannot fight the burglars. His daughter falls sick and lacks the means to paying for her treatment. He must respond in court for an old debt but is forced to bribe the judge in order to be exonerated. His daughter fails at school because she pays for her tuition by working, which leaves her no time for studying. In desperation, he turns to a *djambakus* [Cr. fortune teller], who tells him he will manage to emigrate to Europe but also that he will die soon. Finally, he gets caught in bed by his lover's husband and has to pretend to be even crazier than he actually is to get out of the situation. In short, his world slips through his fingers.

Barudju is not able to provide for or raise his family, and his authority is called into question by his wife, on whom all the household responsibilities fall.

The supporting characters, Bia and Cansera, respectively Barudju's wife and daughter, reveal the complex transformation of power and authority relationships within households as well as the new roles women are being called upon to play in order to survive economic instability (Roque and Vasconcelos 2012, 266). The failures in the formal economy turned women into informal sector specialists, often turning themselves into their family's breadwinners (Roque and Vasconcelos 2012, 268). Bia is the one who bribes the judge to exonerate Barudju and, in other instances, it becomes clear she is the household manager. When Barudju pressures her into subservient roles, such as making his bed, she clashes with him. When she obeys, there is always an expression of her displeasure. Cansera, despite being a teenager, is also able to provide her own means of support.

However, these changes are not perceived as signs of female emancipation by the women themselves. This occurs because, after taking on the role of providers, these women are then left overloaded by their responsibilities as caregivers. Therefore, Bia and Cansera live in anguish, a common feeling among many Guinean women, who feel abandoned and let down by their husbands when the latter fails to contribute to the household (Roque and Vasconcelos 2012, 273).

Made in 2006, this movie was a huge contemporary success, with Mário de Oliveira becoming a well-known filmmaker in Guinea-Bissau¹⁶. The film was produced and distributed by BETA-TV, which receives an advertising spot in the post-credits¹⁷. It was BETA-TV that printed the movies on DVD and put them on sale in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal. Mário de Oliveira was to subsequently cut relations with this

¹⁶ Even though I call these works vernacular films, Mário de Oliveira always refers to them as “teleteatros” [teleplays]. Furthermore, every teleplay he directed featured actors from the amateur theatre group *Blifi*.

¹⁷ Over the image of two editors working in a studio, there is the caption: “We promote culture in the UEMOA space”; Music videos in DVD-Video; TV news stories; TV documentaries; Movies; Seminars; Workshops; Tele and Radioplays; etc.”.

production company because he was not properly compensated for all of the revenue generated by his film¹⁸.

Subsequently, Mário de Oliveira took a film course at the Portuguese Cultural Center/Portuguese Embassy, held in partnership with INCA, taught by Portuguese filmmaker Luís Correia from the production company Lx Filmes. He also got acquainted with directors Flora Gomes and Sana Na N'Hada, with whom he discussed his next screenplays. Nonetheless, his later movies are shorter, with less developed characters and dialogue, and more imperfect sound editing.

Kal Kolidad [Which Quality] (2008) opens with an argument between a couple, Mado and Iota, which makes it clear that he does not contribute to the household, something that embarrasses her. In the meantime, their teenage daughter, Fiana, at her mother's suggestion, borrows money from Bialo, who owns a *taberna* [cr. a container on the street that doubles up as a grocery store]. He gives her a 10,000 cfa bill [about 15 euros] and asks her if she wants to go on a date that evening. They arrange it for 8 o'clock, and it is implied that she will reciprocate sexually. Later, we learn that Iota wishes Fiana to marry a man different from the one Mado has promised her to. Meanwhile, Mado is a night guard and tells about his dreams, haunted by an accident, to his boss, who fires him on the grounds that he does not need a guard who sleeps during work time. Mado apologizes and the boss reconsiders. However, Mado falls asleep at work again and is robbed but the robbery was a trap set by his boss, in order to find out if he was actually awake. Fired, he must work at the construction site, and without the money to buy rice, he pretends to have been mugged a few meters from the *taberna*. But Bialo, who has already lent money to his daughter, tells him he does not sell on credit. Before that, Bialo had been caught with Fiana by a woman (Adia) who insults him for taking advantage of a young girl. The movie ends with Adia telling Mado and Iota about this incident, who then kick Fiana out of the house for having been dishonoured and no longer able to marry.

All these characters find ways to deal with or overcome the obstacles resulting from the social disruption they live in. However, none of them is successful. Mado, without a job deemed "dignified and profitable", sees his breadwinner position compromised, a role that Iota must take on. However, this does not represent any disruption to his status as the economic activities performed by women tend to be undervalued (Roque 2016a, 129). The ideal seems to be a good marriage, which allows a girl to fully play the role of a "decent woman", a dream that Mado and Iota nurture for Fiana. Yet, Fiana is the archetype of a young girl who turn to relationships with older men as the means to bankroll her livelihood¹⁹, compromising the future planned, but not secured, by her parents. Despite the humour sprinkled throughout the movie, there is no happy ending.

¹⁸ Interview with Mário de Oliveira by Catarina Laranjeiro (Caldas da Rainha, 01/15/2022).

¹⁹ This type of relationship is commonly called transactional sex. Transactional sex refers to sexual relationships where the giving and receiving of gifts, money or other services is a factor. It is not necessarily framed in terms of prostitutes/clients, but often as girlfriends/boyfriends, or sugar babies/sugar daddies.

Casamenti Caten Raça [Marriage Has no Race] (2012), Mário de Oliveira's third movie, also highlights marriage as a potential mechanism for upward social mobility. The main characters are university students, revealing how this phenomenon extends to the upper classes. The narrative revolves around a love triangle involving Kevin, Baby, and Ricardina, in which both women try to win him over. In order to do this, Baby deliberately gets pregnant, and Ricardina resorts to *futis* [cr. witchcraft]. In contrast, Kevin's adultery is never criticized, and he seems to play a rather passive role in this love triangle. The same character shows how male sexual conquests represent a means of raising one's social status, an expression that in Guinean creole is called *ronku di mātchu* (Moreira 2020). If male virility is summarized by multiple girlfriends, preferably young, this male standard is also responsible for the emergence and perpetuation of women who maintain relationships with older men, of which the film *Clara di Sabura* [Party Clara] (2011) is archetypical (Vasconcelos 2016, 109).

Clara di Sabura is structured around the life of a young woman in Bissau, who is a regular attendee of parties and movies. Not able to achieve good grades and with her indolence often criticized by her colleagues, Clara maintains a love affair with a teacher. Later, Clara begins a relationship with a state minister, which allows her to ascend socially and obtain unlimited purchasing power.

Moralistic and pedagogical, the movie's narrative criticizes women who opt for sugar daddy relationships as the means of ascending socially and correspondingly praising women who study, get a good job, marry, and have children²⁰. In contrast, the film hides the context of endemic poverty that makes prospects for young women tumultuous and unencouraging (Vasconcelos 2016, 86). Even with a secondary degree, young women (and also young man) have to face the sheer lack of opportunities prevailing in the labour market, with their social mobility thus remaining blocked (Bordonaro 2016, 56).

This also reflects how all responsibility for socially disapproved behaviours is commonly placed on women, never mentioning, for example, how they are the target of sexual harassment by their teachers, facing reprisals such as retention or disciplinary measures (Vasconcelos 2016, 102). In this movie, the teacher, Kelvin, reveals his relationship with Clara, without any constraints, to a colleague, who also, similarly without constraint, then confesses to being in love with her. The teacher receives no criticism for sleeping with a student nor does the minister for seducing a teenager (Pina 2014). Furthermore, there is no reference to the family dynamics that encourage or even pressure young women into finding a materially advantageous relationship, thus relieving

²⁰ These are the two competing models for emerging young women in Bissau studied by Joana Vasconcelos. The first are promiscuous women, with multiple boyfriends, who, instead of acquiring skills at school or in the job market, seek a marriage or relationships that ensure the improvement of their living conditions. The latter are women able to contribute economically to their household, who refuse dependence and are professionally accomplished. These women simultaneously fulfil their "traditional" role within the domestic realm, marriage, and procreation, and their "modern" role in the job market. Cf. (Vasconcelos 2016, 115).

or even contributing to their parents' household income (Vasconcelos 2016, 107).

The movie *Religioso Perdido* [Lost Devout] (2015) also provides broad criticism of women seeking supposedly “hedonistic lives”. The film's narrative revolves around a family: Cheeck Umáro and his two wives, Tchunca and Sunca. The two women get along like sisters, and Cheeck Umáro is a good Muslim, who fulfils all the commitments of his faith. However, one day Tchunca and Sunca fall out, and Cheeck Umáro ends up leaving the house with Tchunca to live a life of *sabura* [cr. good life; pleasure]. The two have a lot of fun, although Cheeck Umáro often regrets he is failing his religion. However, when he realizes Tchunca is cheating on him with another man, he returns in desperation to Sunca, who was also desperate, believing she had lost him forever. He then asks Sunca, his family, and God for forgiveness. Once again, the responsibility for unbecoming behaviours is placed on women, and, in this case, the man is even portrayed as a victim of these behaviours. Therefore, there is a common pattern to these narratives, which make them valuable sources for studying the perceptions and transformations in gender roles.

Religioso Perdido was produced by a group of colleagues working at the aforementioned garage shop *Máquina Motor* with its distribution proving rather peculiar. Its director, Rainel dos Santos²¹, tried to sell the movie to Guinea-Bissau's public television station, whose director had changed after the 2012 coup d'état. The new director supposedly saw the film on his work computer before showing it to his family. In just a few days, the movie was on sale in Bissau's Bandim market and, months later, circulating all over the Internet. Umáro Sabali, the film's lead actor, currently lives on the outskirts of Lisbon and, when he passes his countrymen on the street, he is immediately recognized. He is also famous throughout Guinea-Bissau for his performance in this *Teleplay*.

Among the works reviewed here, only *Clara di Sabura* defines itself as a movie, having been screened at several film events as well as on Guinean public television. *Barafunda* and *Kal Kolidad* were printed on DVD and later sold in Guinea-Bissau's main markets, screened in informal movie theatres and²², finally, made available in African stores across Europe. The informal sharing of movies caused their creators — production company BETA TV and director Mário Oliveira — to quickly lose control of their circulation and reproduction, obtaining very little financial return for their work. Subsequently, these movies have been widely distributed over the Internet. *Casamenti Caten Raça*, on the other hand, fits into the most recent Teleplays, which could be defined as *Webplays* [Webteatros] as they interweave digital media with theater. They are very short and designed to be seen, reproduced, and shared only over the Internet.

²¹ Interview with Rainel dos Santos by Catarina Laranjeiro (Santo António dos Cavaleiros, 02/24/22)

²² Various audiovisual products are screened in these informal movie theaters, including: vernacular films, Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood films, soap operas, and football matches.

Conclusion

The works I discuss throughout this paper, and that I choose to generically call Guinean vernacular film, encounter clear difficulties in fitting the cinema label, with many self-defining as Teleplays. With modes of production heavily influenced by Nollywood's organizational model, these productions present striking similarities to television content, such as the Brazilian telenovelas, also very popular in Guinea-Bissau²³. Their budgets are rather small, resorting to non-professional actors. Their directors and producers, on the other hand, often invest in their professionalization within the scope of these movies entering a commercial circuit, whether through Guinean public television or by printing and selling DVDs. The huge and quick popularity achieved by these works means that, not infrequently, they are victims of their own success. Pirated and shared through Internet channels, their creators lose control over their distribution and, consequently, any possibility of financial return.

All the directors and actors interviewed — Rainel dos Santos, Mário de Oliveira, Umaro Sabali, Clara de Sabura, En Man, Noel Djassi, Nelca Lopez — currently live in Portugal and report very little engagement with the film arts. They work on construction sites, in restaurants or for private security companies and almost all plan to emigrate to other European countries with higher wages. However, the number of views their works have reached, as well as their huge popularity both in Guinea-Bissau and Guinean communities across Europe, attest to how they constitute essential players in the study of Guinean film production. We therefore need to question just why the film narratives they created have generated such significant impacts among the Guinean population inside and outside of the country.

Guinea-Bissau is remembered and praised for its independence struggle against Portuguese colonial rule but more often makes the news for attempted and successful coups d'états, for political assassinations or drug trafficking. These extraordinary events are recurrent in the Guinean filmography that reaches international acclaim: *Mortu Nega* [Those whom death refused] (1988), *Udju Azul di Yonta* [The Blue Eyes of Yonta] (1994), or *Kadjike* (2013). On the other hand, the movies discussed in this paper portray the infraordinary (Perec 2015) — the commonplace, the trivial, the obvious — to which popular culture devotes its attention. Interrogating normalized violence, which mostly targets women, reflects the great potential for bringing vernacular film into the field of film studies: teenagers who survive on relationships with older men; men who cannot provide for their families; women who succeed in the informal economy; the sexual strategies behind social climbing for which women are often criticized; the transformations in gender roles; guards fired because they fall asleep at night when having to keep two jobs, working during the day and again at night, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

²³ As in other contexts, the influence of Brazilian soap operas is notorious in the social transformations of Bissau-Guinean society (cf. Levine 2017; Tufte 2004).

At this point, the importance of Silvia Roque's contributions emerges, especially her warning that, although the Guinean state may be described as "irrelevant", the dimension of suffering and the normalization of violence caused by the absence of the state and the socio-economic (de)structuring of its country are not at all irrelevant (2016a, 132). These movies parody this (de)structuring, which works as a kind of "background noise" in people's daily life that attracts almost no attention.

By subjecting these works to academic debate, my intention is neither to uncritically celebrate popular culture nor do I seek to convey how film, theatre, and new media intersect to create hybrid results. Filmed with meagre resources, by non-professional crews, using non-professional actors, they open up a unique perspective on the ironies and paradoxes of Guinea-Bissau's contemporary history, which extends to its diasporas, thus constituting fundamental material for historical research. Within this framework, these works may function as privileged sites of inquiry in decolonial film studies when perceived as autonomous agents actively transforming African cinema and contributing to a shift in the discussions on the colonial legacies of film production and distribution.

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