

https://dspace.org/

Africanity and Orality in the Films/Videos of Women Filmmakers of the African Diaspora

Ebrahim, Haseenah

1998
Deep Focus: A Film Quarterly
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/15538

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Ebrahim, H. 1998. Africanity and Orality in the Films/Videos of Women Filmmakers of the African Diaspora. *Deep Focus: A Film Quarterly*. vol. 8, no. 3 & 4.

Africanity and Orality in the Films/Videos of Women Filmmakers of the African Diaspora

Haseenah Ebrahim

In this essay, I consider the role of African cultural heritage and of oral tradition in selected films/videos by women filmmakers of the African Diaspora. For practical purposes, I will limit the scope of my analysis to the work of a handful of filmmakers in the United States and in the Caribbean.

A small number of black women filmmakers have become familiar names to film scholars interested in Third World women filmmakers due to the critical attention, albeit still relatively little, that they have begun to receive in recent years[1]. These include Julie Dash (US), Ngozi Onwurah (UK), Safi Faye (Senegal) and Sarah Maldoror (France/Angola), and of course, Alice Walker, who collaborated with Prathiba Parma on the documentary *Warrior Marks*.

In the United States, a growing number of African-American women have developed a substantial corpus of work, including documentaries, short fictional films, animated videos and feature films. These include Ayoka Chenzira, Alile Sharon Larkin, Camille Billops, Michelle Parkerson, the late Kathleen Collins, Cheryl Dunye, Diane Houston, Jesse Maples, and many others. In this essay, I will focus on two texts by African-American women filmmakers—a feature film by Julie Dash and a short fictional narrative by Zeinabu Irene Davis. I will also examine two films/videos by women filmmakers from the Caribbean. These include the first feature film directed by Martinican filmmaker, Euzhan Palcy, and a documentary by the Cuban filmmaker, Gloria Rolando. While the oral tradition as practised in Africa can be characterized as inherently conservative, I argue that within the African Diaspora in the Caribbean and the United

Mother of the River



States, its use by women filmmakers is one that is ultimately subversive in nature. These filmmakers recognize that elements of the oral tradition, including tales, proverbs and other sayings, riddles, music and drumming, popular remedies, and beliefs about the world, constitute an alternative form of knowledge to that validated through Western criteria including rationalism and empiricism, and through the authority invested in literate forms of expression. I have argued elsewhere that a respect for alternative (i.e. to those privileged in the West) forms of knowledge constitutes an important feature of a "pan-African feminist" aesthetic and critical praxis[2]. Such alternative forms of knowledge include not only non-literate modes of *expression* of knowledge, but also knowledge that is not necessarily envisaged as such by the West, including forms of knowledge often dismissed as superstition, or as signs of primitiveness because their validity cannot be empirically verified, or knowledge which is assigned subordinate status, such as non-scientific methods of healing.

Julie Dash

In 1991, Julie Dash released her first feature film, *Daughters of the Dust*, a film memorable for its exquisite cinematography, its languid pace, its centering of black women in all their multifacetedness and beauty, its evocation of the multiple religious heritages of the Geechee/Gullah community, its blurring of the boundaries between the living, the dead and the unborn, and between past, present, and future, its depictions of women's spaces, and its sheer lyricism. It is a film that is not about slavery but which does not forget that history. It is a film that does not depict a single white character, but cannot ignore the oppressive presence of white domination as the character of Eli is overwhelmed by anguish about the paternity of his wife's unborn child.

The film depicts a pivotal day in the lives of the Peazant family, living on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, as they prepare a final feast before some members of the family depart for the US mainland to start a new life. The title of the film is an adaptation of a biblical phrase from Ezekiel, and refers to that which is old and crumbling. The matriarch of the family, Nana Peazant, holds on to the "scraps of memories" which constitute the necessary substitute for a missing family history, reflecting the fact that most African-Americans cannot trace a solid family lineage due to conditions of transplantation and migration under slavery. The film itself is based on a number of oral histories, as well as written sources such as letters, to recreate Gullah life and culture at the turn of the century.

Daughters of the Dust explores Gullah culture and, especially, its African ancestral roots. The major characters embody various West African deities that survived the Middle Passage—*Oya, Ogun, Obatala, Elegua*, etc. African culture resides in the bottle tree outside the house intended to protect its inhabitants from evil, in the flowers placed in a glass of water to communicate with the ancestors, the ring games played by the children, in the hand signals the men use in secret communication with one another, and in the stories and legends of the ancestors who walked across the sea rather than allow themselves to be enslaved. The place at which the family gathers for their last picnic meal, Ibo Landing, is one that is significant in Gullah history as the place where the ancestors turned their backs on slavery.

The film's structure is decidedly African. The story is not linear; it digresses and meanders. There is no individual hero torn by psychological conflict, and the narration is multilayered. As in African films like Souleymane Cisse's *Yeelen*, Dash privileges wide-angle shots over close-ups, and slow pans that provide rich details of the textures of everyday life. In addition, the film presents voice-over narration by the family matriarch, Nana, and her unborn great-grandchild. Toni Cade Bambara notes that *"the dual narration pulls together the past, present and future—a fitting device for a film paying homage to African retention, to cultural continuum...the storytelling mode*

is indabe my children and crik-crak, the African-derived communal, purposeful handling down of group lore and group values in a call-and-response circle."[3]

Despite its unusual subject matter (a film about African-American women at the turn of the century) and style (its distinctly African-centred aesthetic), the film owes its success to word-of-mouth, and to a particularly strong show of support by black women. The film is, of course, a powerful challenge to the pervasive denigration of black womanhood in mainstream American stage and screen, which for decades have limited the roles of black women, especially dark-skinned black women, to mammies and prostitutes.

Ironically, *Daughters of the Dust* has been called a "French film" and described as "European" when in fact, it presents a distinctly African cinematic aesthetic[4]. Perhaps, the real significance (and failure?) of Nana Peazant's efforts to ensure the preservation of an affirmative African heritage becomes apparent in the fact that these Eurocentric descriptions of the film were both made by African-Americans. Sadly, such descriptions confirm the narrow range of perception still characterizing the manner in which many film viewers, critics and executives approach films that do not meet stereotypical requirements about how African-Americans should be portrayed, and what kind of stories should be told about them. Nevertheless, *Daughters of the Dust* remains a spectacular cinematic experience for those willing to open themselves up to a motion picture delight.

Zeinabu Irene Davis

A good friend of Julie Dash and fellow alumnus of the UCLA Film School is Zeinabu Irene Davis, an independent filmmaker and an academic. Davis' *Mother of the River* (1995) is a short (30 min.) fictional film, shot in black and white, that draws its inspiration from Davis' strong connections with her African ancestral heritage. Suitable for children and adults alike, the film depicts the friendship that develops between a young slave girl, Dofimae, and a mysterious woman on the run from slave-catchers. The injured woman, who identifies herself only as Mother of the River, has a $10,000 reward on her head because of her role in helping runaway slaves escape to freedom. The woman, as Dofimae learns, also has certain magical skills, including the ability to fly at night, a skill that Mother of the River herself attributes to the help of the ancestors. Dofimae sneaks off to the river at night with food and medicine to help the injured woman recover, so that she may escape and continue her work.

The film begins with a Yoruba proverb that states: *"Riddles are the horses of discourse."* Some of the most memorable scenes in the film include the interaction between Dofimae and her father as he spurs his daughter on to independent thought by drawing on oral forms of communication to develop her analytical and critical skills. In the United States, slaves were not permitted to attain literacy or "learning."

Not only does Davis draw on such riddles and proverbs to depict the bond between Dofimae and her father, she also highlights the role of the oral tradition in maintaining the cultural heritage of an enslaved people. Riddles, proverbs and tales clearly constitute a discursive space representing what Maryse Condé defines as "a pedagogy of survival in a hostile environment"[5]. It is also a pedagogy of resistance, and a site of cultural affirmation and empowerment. In portraying this pedagogy of resistance through the cinematic medium, Davis herself then perpetuates a pedagogy of resistance and self-affirmation, teaching younger and older viewers alike aspects of African-American history long forgotten or suppressed by imperial histories that either erase the role of black resistance to slavery—or to racial and/or colonial oppression—or subsume it to versions of history that depict emancipation as resulting from white leadership or magnanimity.

The character of Mother of the River was inspired by the legendary tales recounting the military cunning of the rebel heroine known as Sister Nanny. Also known as Granny (or Grandy) Nanny, this indomitable woman was a leader of the Jamaican Maroons (runaway slaves who set up their own

rebel states) whose refusal to yield her people to captivity led her to fight the British in early 18th century Jamaica. With a $10,000 reward on her head for her role in enticing and helping slaves to run away, Mother of the River reiterates the legendary Nanny's supernatural powers and her role as a cornerstone of Maroon feminism, as well as historical figures such as Harriet Tubman. Tubman was herself an escaped slave, who in the mid-nineteenth century, became one of the Underground Railroad's most active "conductors", helping over 300 slaves escape to freedom[6].

Mother of the River, the character and the film, reinscribe a pan-Africanist sense of unity with legendary figures in the history of slave resistance in the New World—as when the old woman talks to Dofimae of the "ghost people" with whom she works to help slaves escape to the north, i.e. Sister Nanny, Dessalines and Gunga Zumba[7].

Mother of the River also depicts white women's participation in the institutions of slavery, not just as passive partners to their male slave-owning husbands, fathers and sons, but as active beneficiaries and perpetuators of the system of slavery. This depiction, understandably, has upset white women who, on occasions after screenings of the film, objected to the depiction of a white woman as an overseer and slave-hunter in the film. Davis notes that this depiction was the result of careful historical research which documents the participation of white women in such roles. This film thus not only utilizes a fictional narrative to document the conditions of slavery and the value of the oral tradition as a pedagogical tool necessary for survival, but also the problematic tendency of white feminists to ignore their own privileged positions in relation to their sisters of color, not only historically, but even today.

Black women filmmakers have also begun to make their presence felt outside the United States. I would like to focus on two women in the Caribbean who have dedicated themselves to using the medium of film and video to validate their African heritage, Euzhan Palcy of Martinique and Gloria Rolando of Cuba.

Euzhan Palcy

The small island of Martinique in the French West Indies is the birthplace of an important figure in the history of black women filmmakers, Euzhan Palcy. Palcy earned the distinction of becoming the first black woman to direct a Hollywood production, when she made the anti-apartheid feature film, *A Dry White Season*, based on a novel of the same name by the South African writer, André Brink, for MGM in 1989. However, it was an earlier film, her first feature, entitled *Rue Cases Nègres* (1983), released in the United States as *Sugar Cane Alley* (1984) that earned Palcy a number of awards and substantial recognition. This poignant first feature has become a classic of Caribbean cinema, providing an insider's perspective of a period in Martinican history. *Sugar Cane Alley* won the **César Award** (the French Oscar) for Best First Feature, the **Silver Lion** at the Venice Film Festival, and the **Palme d'Or** from the French League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism. It is a poignant adaptation of the novel *La rue cases-nègres* by Martinican writer, Joseph Zobel (who appears briefly in the film), which was banned on the island for 20 years after its publication in 1950[8].

Set in 1930s colonial Martinique, *Sugar Cane Alley* depicts a short period in the life of José Hassam, the grandson of a brusque but loving sugarcane worker on a Martinican plantation. The old woman, M'man Tine, refuses to allow her grandson to follow in her footsteps by joining the *petites bandes*—groups of children put to work on the sugar plantations. She is determined to give him the formal education necessary to pull him out of the harsh world of material deprivation and physical labour that is her own lot in life. As a result, she makes a number of sacrifices to ensure José is successful at school, including moving to the capital, Fort-de-France, a world of urban sophistication in which she herself is uncomfortable. Here she has to take in washing to make enough money to supplement the meagre scholarship José has received to attend the *lycée*, which would prepare him to enter the civil service or further his education in France.

Subplots include the story of Léopold, a *mulatto* classmate and friend of José's, and the deep bond between José and his spiritual father, the old man, Médouze.

One of the most striking aspects of Sugar Cane Alley is its cinematography, specifically the use of color. The film does not reproduce the familiar vivid colors of (blue) sea, (white) sand and (green) palms one associates with the Caribbean. The sepia tones of *Sugar Cane Alley* not only evoke a sense of the past, they also subvert the hegemonic myth of the Caribbean as tropical paradise. Palcy refuses to reproduce the "Caribbean" as the familiar mythology produced by Hollywood for First World viewers, i.e., as "island in the sun" images depicted in commercials and mainstream films. The "tourist postcard" images bring with them the concurrent danger of situating a discourse of racial and class domination in a setting that exoticizes poverty and oppression.

A notable aspect of the film, as in *Mother of the River*, is the importance the filmmaker places on the role of the oral tradition and its role in cultural survival. In *Sugar Cane Alley*, scenes depicting the practice of the oral tradition are clearly among the most memorable scenes in the film. Scenes of Médouze asking riddles of the eager young José, and passing on knowledge of herbal remedies, reflect an African pedagogical exercise which integrates into the lesson specific worldviews about life and creation.

Médouze recounts to José tales of his African heritage and history. These counternarratives of history draw on both Médouze's own experiences, and that of a popular collective memory, in order to challenge the emphasis on French history that the children of Martinique are inundated with at their local schools. Palcy herself learned little of her African heritage or her own history at school. In Martinican schools, the focus is on French history and culture. Palcy learned of the African aspects of her heritage from her paternal grandmother, whose character is extended to Palcy's view of Médouze.

Thus, Palcy's narrative strategy in *Sugar Cane Alley* draws heavily on orality, storytelling and the elided historical consciousness, to reveal that Jose's identity—and Caribbean identity—requires negotiating a path between two cultures, an imperial one and an ancestral one. Cultural elements drawn from the African oral tradition, such as the *laghia* and the storytelling at wakes, the fabrication of charms, the singing of chants (to ward off evil, and work songs that ridicule "whitey"), compete with the elite's elevation of French language, customs and practices. Médouze's stories provide the foundation for a strong sense of identity to counter the inroads made on the self-esteem of a young black child by the French educational system and the Martinican social structure, both of which denigrate African heritage.

African cultural heritage resides not only in the act of storytelling, but also in the kind of ritualized performance of call and response as seen in encounters between José and Médouze. The tradition of oral literature positions context and performer as crucial elements with the storytelling performance, requiring an intimate connection between teller and audience. Abrahams has noted that both the tale, and the telling of it, are important in Caribbean storytelling performance. Noting that all performances draw upon a learned repertoire of conventional devices, Abrahams notes[9]:

As an aesthetic transaction, the telling of the tale is judged in terms of the performer's success in factoring in the physical setting and the audience's size, character and disposition...and the vigour, focus, eloquence, inventiveness, authenticity, and authoritativeness of the rendering.

Gloria Rolando

Also espousing a concern for rehabilitating the African cultural heritage in her country is Gloria Rolando of Cuba. Although she spent over 20 years at ICAIC (the Cuban Film Institute), Rolando now heads her own independent video production group, Imágenes del Caribe, based in Havana. Rolando's stated purpose of examining aspects of the African diaspora experience, and/or her African ancestral legacy has, to date, been

manifested in all of her three documentaries. I will only discuss the first, *Oggun: Forever Present* (1991), which is a celebration of the popular Afro-Cuban religion known as *regla ocha*, or Santería, which is derived from the Yoruba culture of West Africa.

In 1994, *Oggun* won the **Premio de la Popularidad** at the Festival de Video Mujer e Imagen in Ecuador. Dedicated to the tradition of Yoruba-Lucumí chanting, *Oggun* features Cuba's leading *akpwon* (*orisha* praise singer/chanter), Lázaro Rós, a devotee of *Oggun*, god of metals and war[10]. As a celebration of Afro-Cuban religious practices and mythology, it is both entertaining and informative about the rituals and mythology of Santería in Cuba. Rolando argues *Oggun*'s primary value lies in its preservation of cultural forms that were the province of a generation that is now dying, and whose legacy is only now being captured in its original form. Arguing the oral tradition which Rós practices as an *akpwon* reflects a communal history, as it draws upon the words of many others before him, Rolando presents the legend of *Oggun* through the spoken and sung words of Rós, combined with striking visual re-enactments drawn from the rich mythology of the Santería pantheon of deities known as *orisha*.

Oggun dramatizes the tale of Oggun, the god of metals, war, progress and civilization who, after becoming enamoured of his mother, goes into self-exile into a forest hideout where he lives and works in solitude[11]. Such exile puts at risk the progress of civilization, and Rolando's visual metaphors of the metallic tools of civilization—anvils, hammers, machetes—falling apart are compellingly presented through slow motion photography which renders the scenes dramatic, lyrical and spiritual. Structured around Rós' recounting of the *patakís*, i.e., the mythical legends of the Yoruba oral literature passed down over the ages by the akpwons, the film combines dramatizations of these legends with Rós' participation in the *toque de tambors*. The *toque de tambors* are ritual drumming ceremonies intended to invoke an *orisha*[12]. The dramatic recreations of the *patakís* draw upon, and are presented using, the tools of the oral tradition. The dramatizations involve no dialogue, utilizing instead a combination of dance and other movement, accompanied by Rós' praise songs to the relevant *orishas*. *Oggun* is a powerful presentation of Santería *"as a living tradition in rituals, dance, music, performance, storytelling, costume, spectacle and spirit possession."*[13]

Rolando supplements these tools of the oral tradition with those specific to the cinematic medium—slow motion shots, shooting during the early light of dawn, curtains of mist created with the use of a fog machine, the use of fades and slow dissolves, use and careful manipulation of multiple sound effects to create a mythical forest setting as the world of the deities. The dramatizations also utilize music especially composed by the renowned Cuban singer and performer Pablo Milanés. The editing juxtaposes these dramatizations with Rós seated under the holy *ceiba* tree, and with scenes of Rós singing at the *toque de tambors*, accompanied by the ritual singing and dancing of other followers.

In addition to Rós' tale of Oggun's departure from, and return to the world outside his forest exile, Rolando provides audiences with introductions to some of the other major *orishas* of the Santería pantheon —*Oshun*, the goddess of love, *Yemaya*, goddess of the seas and rivers, Oya, goddess of the wind, cemetery and rainbow and Shango, god of thunder and lightning. Rolando also captures the living tradition of Santería by ending the documentary with a follower of Oggun, appropriately with the iconic machete in hand, being "mounted" (a state of spiritual possession by a deity) during a religious ceremony. Dayan notes that those fragments of African religious rituals that form the basis of many Caribbean cultures may have been viewed as the marks of savagery by many historians, *"but for the majority of people, these folk or local religions not only gave collective strength, but preserved the histories ignored, denigrated, or exorcised by the standard, 'imperial' histories" and "kept alive the lives and deaths of the ancestors."*[14]

Conclusion

The knowledge embedded in proverbs, riddles, sayings and tales that form the foundation of most oral traditions have been denied the status of "theory"; nevertheless, they frequently theorize about the world and how it functions, as echoed in the self-reflexive Yoruba proverb, *"Riddles are the horses of discourse."* Under slavery, and later under colonialism and neo-colonialism, the oral tradition as a mode of expression, and African cultural heritage in general, has suffered a long history of denigration in the New World. Katrak argues that the use of oral tradition is a tactical strategy in the decolonization process[15]. As such, one can see its inclusion as a crucial element of African cultural heritage, as well as it depiction on the silver screen as a valuable means of validating and communicating elements of an African heritage and worldview, as a paradigmatic intervention countering the cultural erasure and "epistemological violence" that these women filmmakers view as the consequences of European enslavement and colonization in the Caribbean.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay, I am using the term "black" to refer only to women of African descent who self-identify as "black." I am aware, of course, that term "black" is sometimes used more broadly in some countries to include other people of color, especially South Asians, as in the UK and in South Africa. It is also used more narrowly in some countries, where not all people of African descent consider themselves "black"—as in parts of the Caribbean.
2. For an elaboration of a pan-African feminist critical framework, see Haseenah Ebrahim; *"Re-Viewing the Tropical Paradise: Afro-Caribbean Women Filmmakers"* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1998).
3. Toni Cade Bambara, *"Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinematic Movement,"* in Black American cinema, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993).
4. The film was described as a "French" film by essayist and cultural critic, Stanley Crouch at a conference on black cinema held at New York University in 1994. It was described as "very European" by Stephanie Allain, a studio executive at Columbia Pictures. Allain is quoted in Nina J. Easton. *"The Invisible Women..."* Los Angeles Times, Sept. 29, 1991.
5. Marie Shelton, *"Condé: The Politics of Gender and Identity,"* World Literature Today 67, no.4 (1993) : 718.
6. The "Underground Railroad" is a term used to refer to an elaborate secret network of safe houses in the northern states of the United States, organized to help fugitive slaves from the American South escape to freedom to the North and to Canada.
7. Dessalines was a former slave who became governor-general of Haiti (then Saint Domingue) after successfully fighting off Napoleon's forces when the latter announced his desire to reintroduce slavery on the island in 1803. Ganga Zumba was the legendary chieftain of an autonomous republic of fugitive slaves in 17th century Brazil.
8. Imruh Bakari, *Memory and Identity in Caribbean Cinema;* New Formations, no. 30 (1997) : 74-83.
9. Roger D. Abrahams; *The man-of-words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture;* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1983).
10. *Lucumí* is the Cuban version of the Yoruba language in which liturgical songs of the Santería religions are performed.
11. The tale told here refers to Oggun Alaguede, the blacksmith, one of many manifestations of *Oggun*.
12. Arturo Lindsay, ed. *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art;* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).
13. Ibid., xxi.
14. Joan Dayan, *Erzulie:A women's history of Haiti;* Research in African Literatures 25, no. 2 (1994): 5-31.
15. Ketu Katrak, *Decolonizing Culture: Towards a Theory for Postcolonial Women's texts;* Modern Fiction Studies 35, no. 1(1989): 157-178. The political role of the oral tradition as a site of subversive activity is noted by Jackson who states that *"some lullabies of slave women contained hidden meaning and functioned as freedom and protest songs ...[others] kept the African past alive."* Irene V Jackson, "Black Women and Music: A Survey from Africa to the New World", in *The Black Woman Cross-culturally,* ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co. Inc., 1981). Similarly, Nettleford observes that dance has also been used as a political tool, cloaking defiance of the power structure and concealing the planning of slave rebellions. Rex Nettleford, *Inward stretch, Outward Reach: A Voice from the Caribbean* (London: McMillan, 1993).