Corporate Brand, Hegemony and the Performing Arts: An Insight Into Underdevelopment, Neo-Liberalism and Entertainment in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The modern digital world has engendered a lot of innovations in terms of exchange of ideas and culture. This is coupled with the fact that globalization has accelerated the way goods and services move around the world thus ushering in an age of liberalism. Within this mix, developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan African have had to contend with the intricacies and complexity of global neo-liberalism foisted on its young citizens, most of whom find themselves immersed in the vortex of unemployment, bad political leadership, conflict and collapse of basic infrastructure. In an attempt to find other means of realizing their life's ambitions, most of them have embraced the method of using their talent and ingenuity to appropriate wealth and fame; ideals denied them as a result of the pall of underdevelopment. It in this regard that individuals and corporate bodies have thrust up the idea of reality Tv as a quick solution to socio-economic empowerment in the continent. This paper examines the phenomenon of reality television in Africa and concludes that it is a product of neo-liberalism whose quick ascendancy in the continent has been propelled by the challenging vagaries of underdevelopment.

Key words: Corporate Brand, Underdevelopment, Neo-liberalism and Entertainment

Introduction

Over the years, the developmental challenges of Africa have been enormous. According to Paul Collier (2007), although the third world which Africa is the main sphere of, has shrunk, over the years, the developmental challenges however, have been a rich world of one billion people facing a poor world of five billion people (3-1). Collier also contends that by 2015, about 80 percent of the five billion poor will live in countries that are considered to be developing at an amazing speed in Asia and Central America (5). This conclusion not surprisingly, leaves Africa out of the equation. With the exception of South Africa, most of the nations, south of the Sahara, are at best countries at the bottom of global development indices. They coexist with others in the twentieth century, but their reality is decades back. They are riddled with political and economic instability, insecurity, corruption, ignorance and disease. Most of the young population of these impoverished nations in Africa, look up with desire, dreaming of the material and social comfort enjoyed by their peers in the more economically prosperous nations. Hence there has been the growing tendency to find quick and sure ways to escape the poverty line and make it to the top. This tendency has given rise to a number of emergent economic, socio-cultural and religious schemes in the African continent, most of which in the words of Peter Schraeder (2004), are "exploitative and Western oriented" (323). It is also in this regard that scholars such as Patrick Bond and George Dor (2003), have challenged the efficacy of neoliberal ideas in Sub Saharan Africa. Our focus here will be the economic and social dimensions with special interest in the entertainment industry.

The willingness of the West to export entertainment brands to Africa and other parts of the developing world, one may argue is part of the larger scheme associated with the realization that with globalization, the rich Western nations have become increasingly vulnerable to the large islands of chaos, insecurity and underdevelopment which is the lot of most nations in Africa, the Middle East, Central America and South East Asia (Collier, 5). This realization has become more evident and pronounced ever since the September 11 2001 terrorist attack in the United States and the July 7th 2005 attack in England. In tackling this developmental problem in the developing world, in addition to the regular aid programmes, there seems to have been a conscious effort to employ cultural artefacts as

vehicles of economic and social pacification. It is in this regard that one would view the explosion of Western entertainment forms in Africa today.

Theoretical Framework

As a term, neoliberalism refers to an all embracing economic ideology that advocates the supremacy of market over any alternative social arrangement from both a comparative and historical perspective. It urges for an efficient allocation of scarce resources for maximum benefit as a result of relatively unlimited human needs (*Chambers Concise Dictionary*, 695). Some of its defining precepts are freedom of choice and respect for private property. It also acknowledges the individual rights that underpins the relationship between the producers and consumers, and champions the ultimate realization of human ends.

The features of neoliberalism highlighted above suggest several of its facets. In one sense it is seen as a revival of liberalism. This definition suggests that liberalism, as a political ideology, has perhaps been absent from political discussion and theory for a period of time, only to emerge in more recent times in another form. However, our line of argument here assumes that liberalism has evolved via a process of initial growth, inertia and decline, and finally a recent rebirth. Alternatively, neoliberalism might be perceived of as a unique ideology that emerged from liberalism. Under this interpretation, neoliberalism would share some of the defining attributes and vocabulary of liberalism. In fact, scholars such as Adam Wolfson (2004) and Francis Fukuyama (2006), argue that it is an ideology somewhat similar to, yet significantly different from much conventional conservative thought.

As a contemporary socio-economic and political movement, neoliberalism arose as a major paradigm shift facilitated by a confluence of persistent and intractable recession beginning from the second half of the twentieth century from which standard economics proved ineffectual. In the context of development, neoliberalism saw the state as the major obstacle to effective functioning of the market and the encouragement of growth both nationally and globally. It thus directed attacks at the overbearing role of the political establishment. The main aim of course, was to checkmate the influence of the state by restricting its role to the provision of basic municipal services and ensuring that it provides the appropriate environment for private individuals and businesses to operate. It also argued that the state should protect property rights and associated contractual obligations, thus growing the resources and ensuring safety and security. It is in this regard that Dag Einar Thorsen (2011), argues that the idea of neo liberalism has been inspired by an age of greater complexity, uncertainty, volatility.

Proponents of this socio-political and economic theory also draw conclusions such as that, the individual rather than collective platform is the best basis for decision making and that the role of the state should be limited to creating an environment conducive for people to freely compete, make decisions and choose between alternatives. In this aspect, neoliberal views share a marked similarity with Adam Smith's "invisible hand" market in enhancing economic welfare articulated in *Wealth of Nations* (Neoliberalism-History and Meaning).

From the definitions above we can distill some important features of neoliberalism. To begin with, one can say that as a term, it goes beyond mere liberalism as it presents a radical liberal demand for equality and liberty which appears to have been tinseled into a demand for total liberty for the talented and their enterprise.   It is in this regard that one can also classify neoliberal entertainment as a form of mass media pop culture that coaxes society to be more engaged with popular art and socio-political high ethos founded on individualism, freedom to choose and profit making. It takes advantage of contemporary technology and voyeurism of audience. In this setup, the dominant class controls the product and means of production and this guarantees control over the various elements of production and dissemination of information.

There are some fundamental questions that confront us here when we talk about entertainment and neoliberalism. First, can we really say that we live in an age of neoliberal entertainment? Is neoliberalism as has been defined, the dominant entertainment ideology shaping our media today and is there a conscious attempt towards coercing the audience to cultivate the taste for neo liberal inspired products. The most likely answer to the three questions posed above is yes. In the following pages we shall try to argue that the neoliberal philosophy has been on the ascendance in twenty first century entertainment industry and has significantly permeated the African clime. The paper will also advance the view that neo liberalist performance seeks consciously to coerce the audience, exploiting

personal features of voyeurism, curiosity and the need to escape from the drudgery of a globalized world suffocating in the umbrella of technology, bureaucracy and socio-economic oppression. The paper will also highlight the underpinning features of underdevelopment such as youth unemployment and poverty as part of the driving force in the ascendancy of the neoliberal art. We shall also try to examine some of the artistic genres that have grown in popularity over the decade and discuss them as representatives of neo liberal performance.

Corporate Brand, Hegemony and Neoliberal Entertainment in Africa
Before delving into categories of neoliberal entertainment it would be necessary to elaborate on the use of the terms corporate brand and hegemony. I have chosen to use the terms to illustrate the capitalist provenance of the performance brands examined here as well as their perverseness in the corpus of the continent's entertainment industry today. They manifest marked characteristics that embody most of the features often associated with neoliberal culture hence my attempt to examine them as corporate artefacts that appropriate and accommodate ideals found in neoliberalism. Some of these ideals include, protection of property and brand rights, demand for total deregulation of the economy and total liberty for the talented and their enterprise.

Contemporary Africa has witnessed an explosion of entertainment forms that try to extrapolate performance brands and features that have been popularized in the West. These entertainment genres are cast in the mould of the in-vogue reality shows that panders to the glitterati and vivacity of the celebrity cult. With the phenomenal growth of satellite cable television, this brand of performance has gained much spread and acceptance among the youth and educated in the continent. Most of these products are cast in the mould of " reality challenge television". The origins of the phenomenon known as reality television can be traced to some television shows in the last three decades of the of the twentieth century. In the words of Charlie Brooker (2007), this type of entertainment was given flip by the emergence of computer based non-linear editing system of rushes that made it possible to quickly edit several video footage into a broadcast format which had hitherto been difficult. The entertainment genre saw an explosion in the twenty-first century with the explosion of brands such as the *Big Brother* and the *Survivor* franchise in America. It is not surprising thus that the Academy of Television Arts and Science in 2003 added the reality genre of entertainment as a category for awarding prices The perverseness of the reality television is such that a study by the Learning and Skills Council in England (2007), shows that one in every seven teenagers hopes to achieve fame and the celebrity status by appearing on a reality show. This being the case in a developed country such as England, one can then wonder less about the sheer lure of this entertainment brand on the army of unemployed and poverty stricken in Africa. Like their peers in Europe, they obviously see in this contemporary neoliberal form an easy way to success.

The international visibility of reality tv has been attributed to a design Albert Moran (1998) calls, the global event format, which has to do with copying and adaptation of entertainment brands. Some of these Western brands that have been replicated in the continent with much success include *Big Brother, Idol, Deal or no Deal, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, The Bachelor* among others. These performance forms are entertainment trademarks with their origins in United States of America sand England. In this paper we shall examine how these corporate brands have been appropriated and adapted by African artists by way of wholesale copying and in some cases adaptation or imitation. We shall also highlight the colossal sums of money paid out to winners which apart from the lure of being an instant celebrity, is the main attracting force of these shows.

The focus of this paper will be the African continent and we have chosen three countries that we believe are representative of Africa, east, west and south of the Sahara. These countries are Kenya in the east, Nigeria in the west and South Africa in the southern axis of the continent. Apart from sharing the commonality of English as one of the major languages of communication, these countries have been malleable to Western influences in politics, education and economy. Thus it would not be very surprising if they have come significantly under the influence of Western tastes and fads especially those fashioned in United States of America and England the two major English speaking nations in the world.   These three countries with the exception of Angola, also together account for more than half of the gross domestic product of Sub-Saharan Africa. This attributes thus, makes it imperative to cast our critical searchlight on the features of neoliberalism and entertainment in the continent on them. Combined, the three countries also have the largest television networks in Africa offering the largest and most varied forms of entertainment of local and foreign contents. Among these programmes is the reality genre which has come to assume

much visibility in the television networks. In the ensuing pages, we shall try to identify those entertainment brands that have found solid foothold in the three countries mentioned above. Our first searchlight will be cast on Nigeria.

Between 2011 and 2012, there were over twenty five reality shows calling for entries in Nigeria. These include, *Gulder Ultimate Search, Roc Da Mic Nigeria, Star Quest, Battle of Talent, Nigerian Idol, MTN Project Fame, Super Mom* among others.   These shows are sponsored by blue-chip companies such as MTN, Nigerian Breweries, Globacom, and Guinness Nigeria among others. These shows are aired at prime-time television periods and their content and structure are tailored to appeal to the young and young at heart. They also pay out huge sums of money as winnings to the contestants. For instance Nigerian Breweries pays out seven million naira (about 46,000 US dollars) to the winner of the *Gulder Ultimate Search* in addition to a giving him or her a brand new Jeep. By the same token MTN pays a sum of 2.5 million naira (about 16,000 US dollars) to the winner of *Project Fame*. The *Amstel Malta Box Office*   show also sponsored by Nigerian Breweries, doles out five hundred thousand naira cash price to the winner, in addition to an I pad and a luxury vacation with all expenses paid.

In Kenya, there are reality shows such as *Expedition Kenya, Yes We Kenya Clan, Basketball Wives Kenya, Idol East Africa*.   In terms of financial payouts, CFC and Stanbic Bank pay 1.5 million Kenya shillings (about 17,000 US dollars) to the winner of the show *Magnet*.   A group made up of The African Enterprise Challenge Fund, African   Soil Health Consortium, Briton Department For International Development gives out 600,000 US dollars to the winner of the *Shamba Shakeup* reality show. Another reality show called *Slimpossible* in the country splashes a cash price of One million Kenyan shillings (about 11,000 US dollars) on the winner.

We shall go further to cite examples from South Africa which has its own fair share of this genre. They include acts such as *Class Act, Idol South Africa, Big Brother Africa, Pop Planet, Master-Chef South Africa, Big Break Legacy* and so on and so forth. In terms of financial rewards to contestants, the South African reality show, *Dance your Butt Off* pays out one hundred thousand rand (about 12,000 US dollars) to the winner. The Etv and NGC sponsored *Fear Factor* gives three hundred thousand rand (about 37,000 US dollars) to the winner while the Samsung and Ford sponsored *Idols SA* is rewarded with the price sum of five hundred thousand rand (about 62,000 US dollars). One important feature of these entertainment brands is that most of them if not all are of Western origin created either in Europe or America. They are entertainment brands that have global reach and serve to promote the values and culture of individualism unfettered economic freedom and profit associated with the neoliberal West. In this socio political set up, the government provides the enabling environment while the product and execution belong to the individual or corporate citizen who holds the franchise.

One could argue here, that neoliberal entertainment in Africa could also be seen as a rebellion against the suffocating influence and power of the state in the continent. Citizens awed by the massive power of the state which in most cases is steamed in corruption, class oppression and unbridled display of opulence by the ruling class in the midst of mass poverty, have sought means of ventilating their frustrations and freedom and this desire has found expression in artistic products that challenge the notion of the conventional and the socially accepted way of doing things. Thus traditional conventions and fashion defined by the establishments such as the political class and their economic and religious allies have been challenged. Thus the content of most of these reality shows promote things that are at variance with traditional values such as hard work, honesty, traditional decorum and filial bonds.   In some cases the structures of these foreign brands have been mediated with local flavour by the indigenous African imitators. However, one defining characteristic they share is that even when the content is African, the structure and end is glamour and economic. Beyond being articles of cultural hegemony, these entertainment brands are also conscious objects of economic imperialism within the context of the globalized world.

An important factor that has aided the growth of this phenomenon is the massive growth of information technology in the continent occasioned by a greater access to mobile telephone and the internet. These two elements of information have perhaps more than any other medium contributed significantly to the phenomenal acceptance and spread of reality shows in Africa. It is in this regard that we would, however brief, highlight the important role the internet and the global system for mobile communication have played in the growth and expansion of this form of entertainment in the continent.

The modern technology and virtual driven channel of information has virtually placed the television audience almost on the same pedestal as the audience of the live stage with instantaneous feedback between product and viewer in virtual space today. This kind of relationship was something hitherto reserved only for the live stage performer and his live audience.   In fact modern means of mass communication such as the internet have generally facilitated the growth of the entertainment industry in the continent today, making it one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy.   Reference materials and data banks in entertainment can now be made accessible across national boundaries. Information related to new performance genres is literarily a click away. Thus we have seen the emergence of true global entertainment brands that are not identifiable with any single culture. Today through global text-messaging and the internet, entertainment can reach a large number of people around the world almost instantly, with relatively little effort and expense. The internet's cafes, chat rooms and social media generally allow organizers of entertainment products to enlist like-minded people without personal contact or interaction. Moreover, television and the internet in contrast with books and newspapers, often convey a false sense of intimacy reinforced by immediacy. Thus, we seem to be personally involved in the travails and triumphs of the participants in these reality shows. This sense of online togetherness keeps these programmes relevant and in the front burner in contemporary Africa.

Socio-Economic Challenges and Lure of Reality TV

The changes in national television systems in many parts of the world which veered towards satellite cable networks coupled with the move towards privatization, deregulation and the emergence of new distribution technologies has given vent to the prime place occupied by reality tv in contemporary African entertainment industry. We can concur with Thomas Friedman (200), however,   that "the proliferation of reality programming does not represent a fundamental shift in television programming, in the continent, but the industry's reliance on 'reality' as a promotional marketing tool is unprecedented" (7). It is then perhaps, not surprising that some commentators suggest that we are now living in a "post-documentary culture".

The influence of political economy has equally been identified in this proliferation. As Jon Dovey (2000), observes, "The explanation is to be found in the increased pressure on all television producers which follows from varying degrees of deregulations and increased competition for audience share with new channels" (83-4). We have chosen to advance the theme of political economy because it presents a veritable ideological template on which to deconstruct neoliberal art as it argues that every important stage in history is defined by a particular mode of production that gives rise to distinct social relations between different classes and social institutions. Extending this ideology to neoliberal entertainment one can therefore argue that the emergent mode of production in entertainment in Africa is controlled and shaped by the dominant media establishments in the capitals which have keyed into the prevailing fad of reality television championed by the West.

This politico-economic angle leads us to the final thesis of this paper which advances the argument that underdevelopment also contributes in the attractiveness and growth of the reality genre in the continent. Put in another way, we would briefly explore the place of developmental challenges in the growth of the reality television phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa. Sub Saharan Africa is bedeviled with massive youth unemployment and a lot of social conflicts that have created a pool of individuals that are susceptible to various social influences This socio-economic scenario is further aggravated by the tendency of the ruling class to perpetuate themselves and their cronies in power. This has fostered a situation where numerous talented and educated young people are shut out from the economic and political sphere in the society. This anomaly has equally led to a situation where these armies of vibrant educated and talented young people have sought other avenues to ventilate their frustration and realize their dreams of being heard in the society. A lot of them have found the entertainment world as a veritable channel to network, exercise their talent and intellect and in the process climb up the social ladder. It is within this social context, that the reality genre of entertainment has provided a platform for attaining the goals of the economically, socially and politically challenged youth in the continent, which are fame, personal identity and economic empowerment.

Given the colossal price monies paid out to the winners in these shows, there has been a rush by numerous unemployed and under-employed young people to key into their propaganda as agents of instant wealth. Added to this, is the lure of fame and social visibility which it confers by mere participation, often is enough motivation for

even the untalented to participate despite the fact the individual knows that he or she stands no chance of winning. Be that as it may, it should be emphasized that most of the young Africans who have won these shows have been empowered economically and socially. A lot of them have founded their own television shows while others have become goodwill ambassadors for one social cause or the other. We can cite a few instances here with Uti Nwachukwu the winner of Big Brother Nigeria who now produces and anchors his own show *Jara* for Mnet Africa and Omawumi, one of the most successful female music acts in the Continent who was a runner up in Idol West Africa, and the rave making musician Iyanya who won the 2011 *Nigeria Project Fame*. This year; 2012 alone, Keagan Peterson from South Africa won three hundred thousand Us dollars in the *Big Brother Africa Stargame*. Chinwo Nnenda Mercy won one hundred thousand US dollars in the *Nigerian Idol Season Two 2012*. While in Kenya, Ruth Matete, went home with about ten million Kenyan shillings (about 110,000 US dollars) for winning the *Tusker Project Fame Season Five 2012*. One of the defining features in the life stories of these individuals mentioned above is that they all grew up among the middle or lower depth within their society before making it after participating in the reality show. Invariably, they and others like them have become socio models for their kind still living on the poverty and socially marginalized lines.

Conclusion

We shall conclude by stating that while the socio-political neoliberal ideals of performance and entertainment may appear attractive and highly persuasive among the impoverished citizens of Sub Saharan Africa, it is equally necessary to point out that some its benefits appear unsustainable on intellectual, cultural and economic grounds. The proclivity to glamourize quick wealth and fame has further compounded the scenario where the ill-gotten wealth of the corrupt political class and fraudsters are celebrated in the society. This attitude totally negates the traditional values of the people. Growing in accretion with the above is the attraction presented by the cult of celebrity. In this category they find adequate role models the Kardasians and the various celebrity Housewives shows.   This lure has led a lot of young people to glamourize deviant fads such as divorce, indecent exposure, sexually suggestive activities all in the name of trying to play reality. Finally, as a result of the quest to succeed both socially and economically, a lot of these young would be participants, are exploited materially and emotionally by the producers. Often they are required to register with a token fee which at the end of the day yields a pool of financial profit for the promoters despite the fact that most of the army of would be contestants do not make it to the actual show, but are eliminated at the selection stage. We recommend that if the reality genre should persist in the corpus of contemporary entertainment in African, regulators must ensure that their products promote traditional African values and do not debase the human spirit in the altar of materialism and fame.

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