Elevator Baby (2019)

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dir. Akhigbe Ilozobhie [Akay Mason]; prod. Niyi Akinmolayan; screenplay Akhigbe Ilozobhie; music Gray Jones Ossai. digital, color, 83 mins. Anthill Studios, distrib. Film One, Netflix.

Elevator Baby is a Nollywood drama that addresses postcolonial and postmodern anxieties in Nigerian society. The movie is Akay Mason's debut as director, while Akinmolayan is a veteran producer in Nollywood. *Elevator Baby* is a sentimental story of forgiveness. The Nollywood industry is a response to the inadequacies of postcolonial modernity in Africa and specifically in Nigeria. Using innovative production techniques and non-government financing, the industry has grown to become a major player in the entertainment industry throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and in various African diaspora groups across Europe and the United States. The industry started with amateur moviemakers using cheap video cameras to shoot stories recorded on VHS for consumers to watch on VCRs in their homes. The stories resonated with many audiences, and Africans saw their fears, anxieties, hopes, and disillusionment reflected in the homemade films they were watching. Now in its middle age, Nollywood has evolved both in production value and with respect to the modes of consumption.

In her analysis of Nollywood's transition from VHS to DVD, and now to streaming on Netflix, Starr Rhett Rocque states: »What stands out most are the over-the-top storylines […] melodramatic acting, and the seemingly never-ending supply of ridiculous yet still imaginative material […]. Netflix has been steadily building a collection of Nollywood movies for the past few years, but in 2018 it began making originals. As a result, more people are discovering the entertaining world of Nigerian cinema.« *Elevator Baby* is not an original Netflix movie but was already showing in Nigerian theaters before it was acquired by Netflix in summer 2020. While telling a simple story of the life-changing encounter between a »spoiled brat« and an underprivileged woman caught up in extraordinary circumstances, the storyline also foregrounds several broken systems in contemporary Nigerian cities. The flamboyantly affluent lifestyle of the rich is vividly contrasted with the abject poverty of the poor, generously peppered

with the infrastructural anemia with which all citizens contend, regardless of their social class. The film thematizes private pain, shame, guilt, and redemption, while at the same time addressing societal ills, such as youth unemployment and urban traffic jams that put all citizens' lives at risk.

Celluloid-based filmmaking in Africa evolved from oral storytelling—and, in the case of Nigeria, from the Yoruba masque theater, which utilized chants, the dance drama, and other verbal and non-verbal performances by masked entities to take audiences through myriad emotional states (Adedeji 261-62). While the melodramatic form may have travelled to Nigeria through colonialism, it received a warm reception in Nigeria because it coincided with the existing traditional forms of storytelling, non-expressive ritual, festival, and theater. Yoruba masque theater, for instance, evolved with the technology of cinema, though it later collapsed and was creatively replaced by Nollywood.

In *Elevator Baby*, one of the protagonists, Dare (played by Timini Egbuson), is an affluent young man living in a posh but sterile house that less than one percent of Nigerians could afford. He lives with his widowed mother and her boyfriend, a gynecologist, against whom he holds deep resentment. The family is obviously one of the few who have found financial success in a postmodern society where most others struggle financially. The excesses of his class are illustrated by his huge house and Dare's ostentatious lifestyle funded by his mother. His bill from one night of clubbing is 200,000 Nigerian naira (roughly US$ 500), an amount that would constitute half a year's salary for most people his age. After several warnings, Dare's mother cuts him off financially, and Dare decides to look for employment with his honors degree in engineering. He quickly realizes that the job market is in fact tough for everyone, even when you graduate with high honors, unless you have connections. His mother's connections would have helped, but he is determined to not ask for help in his quest for independence. On one of his job-search trips to a corporation building, he encounters Abigail (played by Toyin Abraham). Abigail is a maid to one of the women working in the corporate building. She is in the building to unburden her heart to her boss and to reveal that the late-term pregnancy she is carrying belongs to her boss' husband, who wishes for a male child. The husband had promptly abandoned the maid once a sonogram scan revealed the gender of the unborn baby to be female.

The elevator becomes the explosive stage where Dare, bloated with guilt, anger, and frustration, collides with Abigail, wracked with guilt and the burden of carrying an unwanted baby. The second meeting of the two characters in the elevator on the same day becomes fateful. There is a power outage (a common occurrence in Nigeria) and the backup power generators in the building fail to work due to lack of maintenance. Abigail goes into labor, and it is up to Dare to help her deliver the baby. All sentimental emotions—from fear to anger, pain, frustration, and agitation—are employed in this second elevator encounter. Abigail grunts, yells, and rolls in pain as she pleads for help. She makes all kinds of deals with God as she painfully contemplates dying in an elevator during childbirth. It is also in the elevator that Dare confronts his own inadequacies as a spoiled, unemployed youth living off his mother, an insight that also comes with guilt about his father's death.

The elevator, in a melodramatic fashion, shines light on a country where the most talented youths are jobless, and men sexually exploit women for their own gain. It is a society where the streets and roads are so congested that you cannot get to a hospital in an emergency. All of these issues become conflated in the elevator. The elevator is

itself an artifact and symbol of modernism: tinged with nostalgia for its physical ability to quickly get you to the top and save time in negotiating the high-rise buildings of modernity. In this movie, however, the elevator is a trap that might be inescapable, because it offers a solution to a problem created by postcolonial modernity itself, and that alienates you from all that is moral. This trap also compels you to confront your fears, accept your shortcomings and flaws, and accept responsibility for allowing yourself to be lured in. The pitfalls of modernity need to be maintained by other infrastructures, whose costs might be unaffordable.

Guided by instructions from a phone call from his mother's gynecologist boyfriend, Dare delivers the baby safely before they are freed from the elevator. Under the unbearable stress of being stuck in an elevator and going into labor, Abigail confesses her transgressions to her boss, who is at the door of the elevator with the others, trying to pry it open. The film acknowledges the growing role of cell phones in the documentation and verification of events in today's Nigeria. Dare is asked, for example, to send video evidence before his friend believes him that he is stuck in an elevator with a woman in labor and needs help. The video goes viral on Twitter and Instagram, elevating Dare's status from spoiled brat to hero. The virality of the video and Abigail's confession also shame Abigail for having had an affair with her boss' husband. In addition to pain, fear, and guilt, shame is another strong emotion explored in the film.

Sarah Olivier states that »melodrama is a spectacular form that uses iconic images to move audiences to feel powerful emotions and to assign moral legibility to societal problems« (ii). *Elevator Baby* explores this in its sentimentality and range of emotions, generated in several scenes: Abigail rolling around in pain on the elevator floor, the congested roads that prevented the ambulance from getting to her, and Dare, covered in sweat as he tries to help while dealing with his own feelings of guilt and remorse. Another scene, in which the helpless spectators are standing at the edge of the elevator shining their cell phone lights, creates a melodramatic fusion of fear, tension, expectation, and compassion also in the audience of the film.

Speaking about sentimental fiction, Jane Tompkins holds that these works are »agents of cultural formation […] bearers of a set of national, social, [and] economic […] interests« with »designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way« (xi–xii). The use of melodrama as a powerful mode for telling this story is not surprising, given that Nigerian cinematic sense developed from a traditional performative culture that is didactic in nature and emotional as it moves listeners through stages of virtues and villainy.

Mark Mullen reminds us of the »ease« by which melodrama crosses national borders (44). While it would be easy to conclude that Nigeria, as a former British colony, imbibes the melodramatic form of storytelling through colonialism, it could be argued that the traditional performative oral traditions, such as Yoruba Egungun festivals and masque theaters, included masking, drumming, and other non-verbal elements as well as verbal elements—thus connoting the essence of the melodramatic forms as described by Peter Brooks, when he says that »mélo-drame, literally meaning a play with music, originated on the Parisian stage during the French Revolution […]. Music was used to underscore meaning and intensify emotional responses« (xiii–xvii). Drewal, for example, writes that »the content of Egungun masked performance is highly dependent on the repertoire of myths and performative segments the performer is able to conjure up through gesture, song, dance, and speech in the improvisational moment of performance« (102).

Given the above facts, a conclusion could be reached that while the melodramatic form may have followed colonialism to Nigeria, the precolonial traditional performative art forms, such as the masque theater and Egungun performances, already had demonstrated melodramatic tendencies. Therefore, in its use of melodramatic forms, Nollywood—the contemporary platform for film and storytelling in Nigeria—can be seen as a return to the traditional performative arts as well as a borrowing from European melodrama brought by colonialism.

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