

Estratto da: CINEMAFRICA | Africa e diaspora nel cinema

<http://www.cinemafrica.org>

Rome/Los Angeles, July 2014

Film, Africa, blacks. A conversation with Joy Nwosu



Data di pubblicazione : domenica 16 novembre 2014

Abstract:

This week Cinemafrica shares with you a long conversation with Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko, a Nigerian-born soprano and ethnomusicologist, based in Los Angeles, who released in 1968 a book in Italian called "Cinema e Africa nera" for roman editor Tindalo. This book has been recently re-edited with the title "Cinema e Africa" for Aracne editrice. This conversation has been realized in this occasion and included in the book translated into Italian and in a shorter version.

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Cinema e Africa is currently available in paperback format and can be ordered exclusively via Aracne editrice through this [link](#).

This conversation has been realized in a written form via e-mail on July 2014, and included in the book, but translated into Italian and in a shorter version.

When you came to Rome, with a scholarship offered by your Government, it was 1962, you were 22 years old and your aim was to have an academic training in music and vocal performance, was it? But why did you choose Rome and not for instance London or New York when you would have found less difficulties for the language?

That is a good question. I already had admission to study at the Royal College of Music, Dublin when I was offered my scholarship. I was advised, however to audition, and try to get into the school of music in Rome because Rome was, and still is, where to study *bel canto*. So on my way to Dublin, I stopped in Rome to audition for Santa Cecilia, and was admitted. I then stayed to study in Rome.

What was your first reaction when you found yourself in Rome in 1962? Did Italy reflect your expectations?

My first arrival in Rome, Italy was traumatic. I was a twenty two year old girl, who spoke only English in the midst of people who spoke a language I did not understand. In my world, if you did not speak English, you were considered illiterate. So I thought that all Italians were illiterate. Of course with time, I started to understand that there are different peoples with their different languages in the world.

How have you been received at conservatorio and in university? Did you feel some bias touching you as a young, female, African-born student? Did you notice some changes in the average feeling of Italians toward people of African origins during the period of your staying in Rome, up to 1972, not only in those institutions but in the orientation of common people?

The reaction of the Italians to a black woman was different to the reaction of the English to a black woman. I was used to the indifference of the English, but was not prepared for the curiosity of the Italian. The Italian wanted to touch, feel and interact with me out of curiosity. When I learned to speak the language, after a few years, the curiosity turned into acceptance. To my very close friends, color did not matter anymore, but for those who did not know me, the curiosity continued.

You got your voice diploma after three years of study at Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia (1962-65) and then decided to enroll to Pro-Deo University, following a three years program in Mass Communication, specialization cinematography. Cinema e Africa Nera was originally a final thesis conceived to end this experience. Why did you choose communication and film studies and how did it come to you the idea to dedicate your thesis to the image of blacks in cinema and to African cinema?

My Diploma in communications was for a specialization in Cinematography: Script Writing. The course required us to write our own scripts, discourse, analyze, and criticize the scripts of our class mates. In the end, we were required to write a thesis as our final project. In those days, there was not much going on for blacks in the cinema world, especially for the African blacks. So, for my final thesis, I decided to probe this almost total absence of cinema presence in black Africa. My probe let me to some very eye opening discoveries. The Senegalese, I discovered were at the forefront of cinematography in black Africa. My research was extensive as you can see from the tract, and quite inclusive. I tried looking not only at the presence of black Africa in cinematography, but at the presence of blacks in general. My thesis was supposed to be my contribution towards black presence in cinematography.

What was your experience of film in Nigeria before coming to Italy? Were you a moviegoer? Which kind of film did

you love the most?

I was an avid moviegoer in Nigeria before I went to Italy, and I saw every film that was available to us, mostly Indian films and cowboys films. I saw *Quo Vadis* for the first time in Nigeria when it first came out, and some of the first Technicolor films of those days. I enjoyed Charlie Chaplin's black and white silent movies too.

How do we come from the thesis to the book published by Tindalo in November 1968? Who did suggest you the possibility of a publication?

Before graduation, I had met Giovanni Vento, and we became friends. He was the person in charge of finding and choosing specials for films at Cinecittà at the time, and I and some of my Nigerian compatriots, usually went to Cinecittà to act as specials in films to augment our scholarship funds. There, I met Giovanni. By the time I graduated, we were very close and had become a couple. He was the one who saw the potentials in my manuscripts after I graduated and encouraged me to turn them into books. He got me all the help I needed in publishing the books. His friends in the cinema world rallied around to give the books the push that they needed. I did two interviews with two magazines when the books were released. Those were exciting days for me.

How did you get in contact with the film critic Mino Argentieri, that was to be the author of your foreword?

Mino Argentieri was Giovanni's friend. I cannot remember him now, but I think that I must have been introduced to him by Gianni, that's what we called Giovanni. I was Gianni's treasured companion, he treated me like an African princess that I am. At the same time, he used his influence to get things done for me with regards to those books.

*When you did write *Cinema e Africa Nera*, the issue of the image of blacks in the movies was quite absent in Italy but relatively new even in US. There was the pioneering *The Negro in Films* published by Peter Noble in London in 1946 and was translated in Italian ten years later thanks to Lorenzo Quaglietti, and there were some articles by Romano Calisi, and some other article in French but no works of reference, Noble aside, and things were even more difficult for the other issue, the birth of African cinema, you had just the *Film History* by Georges Sadoul, some articles by Vieyra and Rouch and that was all. How did you manage to develop your research without a consistent bibliography? Who was your official referee at the University?*

I was quite lucky at the time I finished my studies and with two manuscripts in my hands which were well considered. Gianni's friends at that time who were also my friends, were somewhat awed at the fact that I could write a book, not to talk of two books. Even the publisher Tindalo, whom I was introduced to, did not waste any time in accepting the books for publication. We had gone to see him for the book on cinematography. When he saw me, a black woman, an African, and learnt that I wrote the book, he accepted to publish it there and then. On our way out of his office, Gianni casually mentioned that I had written another book which might interest him after he had published the first one, and he called us back to discourse it. I told him the summary of the story, and he accepted to publish that too. I got help for my research from the most unlikely sources; from words of mouth, from old newspapers and magazines, from old films, any films that starred blacks, and from books. I had a lot of help.

In your introduction, you salute the fact that finally you can meet African students of cinematography in European capitals. Did you actually meet some of them in Rome? What about black actors working as extras or in little roles in the Italian cinema: did you have occasion to meet some of them? What on Nigerian community in Italy? Was there a consolidated presence of Nigerians studying and working in Italy at that time?

I was amongst the first batch of Nigerians studying in Rome at that time. We were very few and we knew ourselves. We formed an association, and met once a month to discuss our problems, to compare our check lists, and to help anyone who was in need. This is how we knew when to go out for extra jobs or not. Most of us in Rome at that time were students. We had a few working at FAO, just a family I could remember, and our Embassy at the time was very protective of us. They organized socials for us, and we were invited to all important happenings at the Embassy.

In your chapter about European and American films on Africa, I was very struck by a passage in which you underline the strong continuity existing between fascist colonial cinema and Italian cinema of 60s concerning Africa, included also films made by authors like Antonioni.

Ecco: noi non crediamo si sbagliare se riteniamo che fu a questo tipo di cinema che si ispirò quello di *Africa addio*, *Violenza a una monaca*, *Violenza segreta*, *Congo vivo*, così come non pensiamo di sbagliare se affermiamo che fu dai film di Camerini, di Alessandrini, di Genina che nacquero quei documenti come *Eva nera*, *Mal d Africa*, *Continente perduto*, sul mal d Africa questo sì un contributo razzista veramente originale da cui non si salvò neppure certa produzione di qualità (*L eclisse* di Michelangelo Antonioni). Perché il fascismo, nella sua sintesi sentimental-cattolico-guerriera, fu un fenomeno sinceramente italiano: e un fenomeno che dura.

Am I wrong or it was very uncommon to find in the Italian film criticism of that period statements so harsh regarding the legacy of colonialism and fascism in contemporary Italian culture and cinema? What was the reaction that your Cinema e Africa nera met in the Italian film press?

When I spoke about the Italian curiosity towards the blacks, it was the type of curiosity that you see between a human and an intelligent animal. Something *di quasi umano*, but not human. I had access to a lot of films on blacks at the time of my writing, and I saw that type of curiosity all through those films. I was a fire brand at the time of my writing, and I remember that the excerpt you sent, and thank you for sending it, caused a lot of arguments between Gianni and me. We quarreled over it. Gianni believed that it will bring about repercussions from the cinema community. The fact is that, I was speaking the truth. I know what I saw in the films I watched, and I aptly interpreted what I saw. That was one aspect of my writing that I was not ready to compromise, interpreting the truth.

I was also very impressed by the passage that you dedicate to what you called «il contributo degli afrodoppiatori» underlining how Italian dubbing actors were effective in translating into Italian the American slang spoken by black in the South in films like Gone with the Wind reinforcing in a paroxystic way old stereotypes like those of the mammy, the coon, the uncle Tom. Even that passage, I guess it was mostly something that came from your personal sensibility. I can't find any awareness of that in the Italian film criticism of the period&

Although I was not Italian, and the Italian language was not my primary language, I took some liberty in coining my own Italian words to describe what I could not express adequately in the Italian language. That was how words like *afrodoppiatori* came about. Yes, the Italian dubbing actors were very good in finding adequate Italian words to match their English counterparts.

In your approach to the issue of the image to black in Hollywood and Italian cinema you can feel a radicalism that was probably also the expression of the spirit of the time. Cinema e Africa nera was released in the autumn 1968, a very hot season for the young people, women and black in Europe and in US: demonstrations and riots against the Vietnam War happened every day, universities and factories were occupied, and in US the civil rights movement was facing a crucial moment after the assassination of Rev. King. What was your feeling at that time, did you feel personally involved in the 1968 movement? I'm asking you this as in a way I guess the places you frequented in your first period in Rome, more related to the Catholic church, were not exactly leftist or radical&

Now you can understand the spirit and times of when I wrote *Cinema e Africa Nera*. I was completely immersed in the spirit of the time. The death of Dr. King was like the death of all the struggles of emancipation for the blacks. I was among the angry blacks looking for how to strike out. I was hurting like all the blacks were hurting, and I was not ready to compromise. I saw things as they were, and still are to some large extent. That is how my title, *Io odio, Tu odi* was born. I wasn't a leftist, I was just a radical, still am, if you follow my blog at jinlobify.com, you will see that I have not stopped talking when there is the need to do so.

Your last chapter is dedicated to black African cinema that at that time was at its very beginning. How did you manage to watch first African movies by Sembene and other directors and what was your feeling towards those films?

I watched all the film by the then black directors because I was given access to them through my connections. I was impressed by the efforts of the Senegalese and Gambian directors, but their films were rather dull, not much action, and I attributed that to the fact that they did not have access to film effects that the modern day black directors have.

Before publishing Cinema e Africa Nera in 1968 you had even an experience of actress in an independent Italian movie called Il nero, directed in 1966 by a director making his professional debut, Giovanni Vento. Notwithstanding

*the good press received in Italy after some screenings in film festivals, *Il nero* was never commercially released and so stands even today as unknown to the majority of film scholars. It was indeed very interesting as it was filmed in Naples, and the main actors were actually, a part from you, two non-professional boys, sons of black GIs fighting in Italy during the WW2: but aside from the subject of brown babies that was highly original for those years, the style of film resembled that one of some coeval films by Bertolucci and Bellocchio, and also some other titles from French and American New Wave. What is your memory of this experience?*

Before publishing *Cinema e Africa Nera*, I had years of experience acting as a special in films like *Cleopatra*, with Elizabeth Taylor, *La decima vittima*, which starred Ursula Andress, and many other films. I cannot remember their names. Gianni had written his script years before we met, and had difficulty finding a producer. When we became friends, we both supported each other and that helped us to get things done. He will flash me to potential producers as the protagonist for his film, and all I had to do was smile and agree. Not too long, he found, I believe, Armando Bertuccioli who agreed to produce the film. Finding the other characters was easy. I don't believe any of us was paid for acting in the film. I know I was not paid, I did it only to help Gianni. *You mentioned the fact that Vento was a sort of editor for Cinema and Africa Nera. In your text you emphasizes the importance of Il nero and of the short documentary Africa in casa, in which the case of some black people living in Italy is explored. Could you explain what was actually the role of Vento in the book?*

Gianni was a little more than just my editor. I had already graduated with Summa Cum Lode from Pro Deo University, when Gianni got interested and wanted to take another look at my thesis. It was then he told me that the manuscript had potentials, and advised me to expand my search. He offered me all the help I needed and helped me get the informations I needed. He actually helped me with the search. I remember that we had many occasions of argument, during which he disagreed with the way I said something, and I disagreed with his suggestion on how I should have said it. Sometimes, I had to explain to him what I really meant, and he will tell me the best way to say it *nel parlare italiano*. In other words, my best Italian expressions in the books, were Gianni turning my worse Italian expressions into the way it should be said *nel bel parlare italiano*.

*You published for Tindalo as well a sort of autobiographical novel called *Io odio tu odi*. That was after Cinema and Africa nera. You did mentioned the fact that originally it was written as a scenario for a film to come. How did it come to you the idea to write a scenario for a film? And how then did you decide to publish it as a novel, with a preface by journalist and writer Franco Prattico?*

I have answered part of this question elsewhere, but I want to stress the fact that I studied Cinematography, and specialized in script writing, film scripts. The course of study required each student to write a film script as one of the projects, *Io Odio, Tu Odi* was that project, just as *Cinema e Africa Nera* was my final project.

*As a matter of fact you were in Rome to complete your education in music attending lesson in university and in the conservatory. I guess the best of your energies were devoted to music. Nonetheless you invested a huge amount of energy to film, if we sum the thesis, the two books, and the performance for *Il nero*. Were you intentioned to pursue this interest later, once come back to Nigeria in 1972?*

This also is a very good question. While I was studying music in Rome, opera for that matter, I realized that we did not have any operatic traditions in Nigeria. What will I do as an operatic singer in Nigeria? I started asking myself. We did not even have theaters for classical music performances at the time, our national theater and the MUSON s (Musical Society Of Nigeria) music complex were then non-existent. I had to study something that would at least give me a job when I returned, so cinematography was it. I figured that I could work in Radio or Television with my Mass Communications certificate, and that was exactly what happened. I was a Radio producer for three years in Lagos, Nigeria when I returned before I was hired as a University teacher at the University of Lagos when a new music department was started there. I was one of the pioneer lecturers there.

In Nigeria you pursued a wonderful artistic career as a classical and modern singer, reaching a huge popularity thanks to concerts, records, TV shows. You managed also to reach a good position at University of Lagos, being the unique female lecturer, after some important scholarship of great relevance for ethnomusicology and a prestigious PhD in University of Michigan in 1981, but you were forced to find your way in US in 1996, for the envy and hostility of some male colleagues at university. In Italy, in Nigeria and in US you had to fight to defend and promote your

talent as a singer and as a scholar. With hindsight, and comparing the situations you could personally live, do you esteem that Italy was in the 60s a place where a young, female, Black artist could find a way to express her own talent? What would you advise to many young aspiring artists and performers of Black origin who today face serious difficulties to work in the Italian show business (cinema, TV, music) and are tempted to emigrate somewhere else?

Thank you very much for the acknowledgement. I cannot say that Italy in the 60s was a place for a young, black, female artist to express her talent. It was not that easy for me. Every Italian man, old or young wanted a pound of my flesh. Even a doctor I visited for some female problem wanted to have sex with me before treatment. It was not safe for me. The only way I could protect myself was to latch on to somebody for protection, and that's where Gianni came in. With him by my side claiming that I was his fiancée, and sometimes that I was his wife, I felt fairly protected. Yet, men still found ways of cornering me and asking for sex. You know what the Italian men are, especially with foreigners, but more so with black female foreigners.

To be a performer anywhere in the world for a woman is to face all kinds of abuses. It is still a man's world, and women do not have much options. It is not a world where a woman can go it alone. From the very beginning, the woman must make sure to have a powerful sponsor behind her, or it will be a rough ride.

Did you follow in a way the evolution of African cinemas? What is your opinion about Nollywood?

Yes, Nollywood has come a long way. It started very roughly, and has now blossomed into world class film industry. We have Nollywood films now that can rival even Hollywood films. I could still remember Eddy Ugboma's films with their rough edges, but those were the films that opened the floodgate to what we call today, Nollywood Cinema. We have a lot of charlatans out there too, people who believe that it takes the ownership of a camera to be a film maker. These people are gradually giving a bad image to a young and straddling film industry. In the whole, Nollywood has made big strides, and they are here to stay and grow.