

“I don’t think any Nigerian filmmaker has matched my streak.”- An interview with Kenneth Gyang

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With his debut feature length, *Confusion Na Wa*, Kenneth Gyang made an entry into the Nollywood’s limelight and went ahead to win Africa Movie Academy Award for Best Film category in 2013. He has become one of the most prolific figures in Africa’s bustling film powerhouse. He now boasts of a directory of films which sets him aside as an important auteur in the industry. His films often tackle the question of socio-cultural challenges, especially as they relate to Nigerian youths.

The witty *Confusion Na Wa* which is widely considered to be one of the finest Nigerian films of the 21st century, grappled with identity through a series of encounters between strangers that hinted at the randomness of life. His follow up, *The Lost Café* was concerned with the displacement that follows migration.

In October, Gyang’s latest, *Òlòturé* was released on Netflix, the product of a deal that the global streaming giant entered with EbonyLife Films, perhaps Nigeria’s most prominent film studio. Starring Nollywood regulars Sharon Ooja, Omoni Oboli and Omowunmi Dada, *Òlòturé* a dark drama about the perils of human trafficking is notably, Nigeria’s second Netflix original film.

Kenneth Gyang speaks about *Òlòturé*, the challenges of doing good work in Nigeria and his fight against those who would prefer to put him in a box.

How did you get involved with *Òlòturé*?

In 2016 I was working on my own sex trafficking project, a film set on what I call the road to hell,

starting from central Nigeria all the way to North Africa. We took the film to the European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs (EAVE) producers workshop in 2017 and developed it from there. For research, I was listening to a tonne of radio documentaries, so I was already in that headspace. In 2018 EbonyLife Films got in touch with me and I told them I was already working on something related. We had further discussions and I signed on bringing in all the experience I had already gathered. We kept workshopping the script and we shot the 23rd draft.

What was it like for you stepping into the whole studio system especially coming from your independent, DIY background?

It was easier for me because, for a change, I had the budget to execute. A lot of times when making a film, you envision some things with no idea how you are going to achieve it. With the climactic border scene for example, I told my producer, Mo Abudu, that we can actually film it at Eko Atlantic and she wanted to know how. So, I told her we could build a façade of the real Seme border and film around it. We built it, took a shot from a great angle and sent it to her. She didn't believe her eyes. With a bit of studio budget, you can get more creative while interpreting your thoughts which is like a higher level of filmmaking. In terms of creative control, the studio totally trusted that I could deliver but the reality is someone is always going to be there to question you which is not what would happen with an indie project. I could not play around and be as artistic as I would really want to be. For instance, in the scene where the lead is taking a shower after she was assaulted, if we had shot it the way we envisioned it initially, it would have fucked a lot of people up so we had to sustain a balance.

Was it liberating for you this time, working with more money? And is it something you feel like you could get used to?

I adapt. I have a problem with filmmakers who get too comfortable with a certain environment and they tell you that they cannot adapt. Because where I come from, creativity is using whatever little resources you have to make magic. Even the Tarantinos don't always have all the money that they would want. I certainly couldn't deliver *Òlòturé* on a 5 million naira budget but there are other stories that may not need the size of *Òlòturé's* budget to work. Some will need much more. I am not saying I am getting used to more money, but the key is to keep your artistic integrity whichever direction you take. Budget helps but it isn't the most important factor. Your creativity is. What are you bringing to the table, what have you studied, who are your influences? I understand the concept of storytelling on a universal scale. Since 2006, I have been to a lot of labs around the world. I was at the Berlinale Talent Campus, the Rotterdam Film Lab, Durban Film Mart. Everything you will learn at these spaces boils down to universal storytelling. Also, I have worked extensively with the BBC.

Also, not having to bother about the fundraising process this time must have been great.

Yes, it was. And let me tell you something, in Nigeria, it is incredibly frustrating because people just don't get it. That is why I have always had to run abroad to look for money to make my films. But the challenge with it is that because there is no national film board that helps filmmakers back home, there is a bigger mountain to climb. The way most co-productions are set up is that they want counterpart funding or partnership from national bodies and not private money.

You have gotten critical acclaim with your previous films but never quite on a mainstream level, do you feel like *Òlòturé* is your huge breakout moment?

Before this film, with the old Kenneth you wouldn't even know who the director is. I wouldn't be doing promotions on Twitter or Instagram. I come from a very pure community of artistes who would ideally only care about doing the work. But I realized that in Nigeria it is important to toot your own

horn. Being quiet does not really help. All through the years, people have forgotten the legacy of *Confusion Na Wa*. A lot of the labs and programs I have participated in, I don't think any Nigerian filmmaker has matched my streak. But because I don't talk about it, people don't know. The result is that these other guys who make all the noise end up getting the huge deals even from corporate Nigeria. Am I happy to be doing this self-promotion? No. I'd rather spend my time on something else. But I have to. You know how a filmmaker in France goes into a room and everyone knows who he is immediately, in Nigeria you have to start explaining, oh I am the person who made *Òlòturé* and *Confusion Na Wa*. It gets to a point you tell yourself, no I don't need this shit.

It is some kind of tragedy. I don't think that after *Confusion Na Wa* people should be asking who Kenneth Gyang is.

I hear you but you see people — not just Nigerians — tend to move with the flow of hype, and the blogs and social media can decide which filmmakers get all the acclaim. There was a time I was being positioned as an art filmmaker and I pushed back against that because that kind of boxes you in a corner, one that means you cannot take on the big commercial projects. What do you mean anyway when you say art filmmaker? Are you saying that Abba Makama couldn't direct *Chief Daddy* in his sleep or C.J Obasi couldn't helm *The Wedding Party*? Why shouldn't I be allowed to move between mediums if they all excite me? The other day Barry Jenkins signed on to a new *Lion King* project, no one stopped him. Chloé Zhao can move from *Nomadland* to a Marvel film. That is why I am putting *Òlòturé* in their faces because if it hadn't done well, people would have said, *Oh! it is because it is an art film*.

I don't think *Òlòturé* is an art film...

I am sure the studio has made more mileage on *Òlòturé* than on any of their other films. I am not sure exactly what the budget was but it is on the average scale, certainly not up to the amount they would spend on their regular event films. There were things I would demand and they would explain that while they could see the need, they just didn't have the budget for it. Also, this was a risky bet for EbonyLife. With their comedies, they could always project earnings versus budget. With this one, not so much. But I think that in terms of value as well as profits, this has to be the studio's biggest success story yet.

What are you doing next? There are rumors of a Netflix deal...

I am working on a biopic based on a historical political figure, I can't say who now. But the project is actually well supported and I have been working on it for a while. I might film the teaser in November somewhere in the north. Then we take a break because there is a lot of study material to get through. We are doing this for the culture.

Wilfred Okiche is a Nigerian film and theatre critic based in Lagos. He has mentored film critics at the Durban International Film Festival. He has participated in critics training programs in Berlin, Rotterdam, Locarno and Stockholm. He is a member of FIPRESCI.