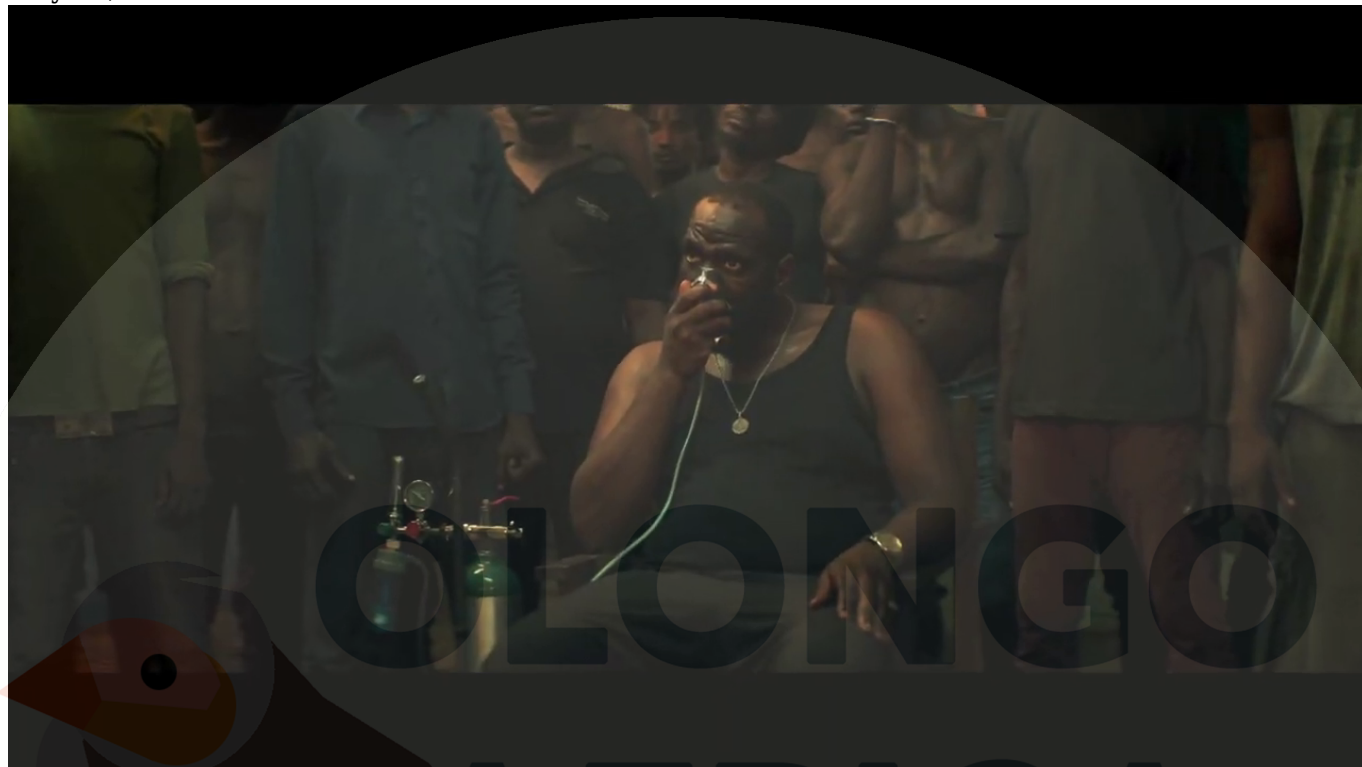


The Future of African film at Sundance

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One of the most gripping moments at this year's Sundance film festival was the screening of the jury prize winning short, *Lizard*. A naughty kid is kicked out of her Sunday school class embedded in one of the popular Pentecostal churches in Lagos. She spends the free time wandering around the expansive compound, stopping short of straying from the guarded premises.

It is a crazy and violent world outside the confines of the church gathering as the events that befall the girl and her family on their way home soon prove. The church — with its teachings about good and evil, heaven and hell — represents a safe space for this innocent. But if there is grace to be found, then punishment for bad behavior must be doled out in equal spades.

Away from the disapproving gaze of her Sunday school teacher, the girl discovers that adults — even those in church — are messy and hypocritical. A junior pastor harasses a female congregant; church aides are filching some of the offering money for themselves. The church becomes a microcosm of the wider society.

Lizard's adult audience is able to recognize these scenes as bad behavior. Everyone knows there is no room for bad behavior in God's house. But director Akinola Davies Jr adopts a childlike gaze throughout the film that casts the heroine as mostly unaware of the import of the events she has witnessed. Viewed through this lens, these encounters come across as a sensory overload. She will be processing them for a long time even as she sheds some of her innocence while galloping rapidly to adolescence and adulthood.

It isn't every time that mainstream Nigerian films preoccupy themselves with the experiences of children like this film does. *Lizard* isn't a typical Nigerian film, and its influences certainly do not hail from the mainstream. Made with funding from BBC Film, *Lizard* has a certain experimental flow that leaves plenty of room for interpretation.

Elements of magical realism — a blown up CGI lizard, several plot points colliding — are deployed to map the child's journey into the unknown with Davies Jr exhibiting a genuine curiosity about how it feels and what it must mean to exist as a child growing up in dysfunctional Nigerian society. "I wanted to pay homage to growing up in Nigeria...in the way that I could relate to." Davies Jr tells me. "The films I saw did a lot of talking down to kids as opposed to seeing the world from their perspective."

Magical realism was a device deployed elsewhere in the visually dazzling, *Night of the Kings*, the second feature length film by Philippe Lacôte, an established filmmaker from Ivory Coast. A treatise on the rousing power of oral storytelling as well as a deconstruction of power especially in controlled environments, *Night of the King* with its circular rhythms and loose story-within-a-story structure pays homage to the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez.

Set in Abidjan's infamous La MACA prison, *Night of the Kings* blends fantasy, history and reality with Lacôte weaving a multilayered yet uncluttered narrative. The conflict — urgent and desperate — is that of a nameless young prisoner who must entertain his fellow inmates in order to stay alive after he is anointed the prison's new storyteller aka Roman.

Lacôte explains his hero's dilemma. "The Roman in the film is not a classical storyteller. He is in a real emergency after the burden is thrust upon him. He must not finish his tale if he wants to survive till the morning, so his story is improvised, made up on the fly and constituting several narratives."

The medium of film instinctively blends several complex narratives- even several embedded within an individual lifetime- into manageable, identifiable plot strands for accessibility. Stepping outside this format isn't exactly rewarded with the broadest of viewership. And yet that is exactly what Jessica Beshir manages with her opaque, endlessly reflective stunner, *Faya Dayi*.

Less a traditional documentary than it is a spiritual journey into the highlands of Beshir's ancestral town in Ethiopia, *Faya Dayi* immerses itself- and viewers- in the rituals of khat, a stimulant leaf originally consumed by Sufi Imams for religious meditation that has since become Ethiopia's most lucrative cash crop.

Through its lyrical narrative, *Faya Dayi* unveils an uneven patchwork of episodes centered around the regular folks who bear a direct relationship to the crop. Beshir is as interested in the people who work on the khat farms cultivating the crop as she is in those who seek out the finished product and its euphoric effects.

She mines their stories and presents them in free-flowing format, touching on universal concerns like love, faith and the bonds that hold families together. Using luminous black and white imagery, Beshir probes the banalities and routines of everyday life in search of the mythical undercurrents that can be traced back to them.

A document of quiet, hypnotic power, *Faya Dayi* is impossible to box into any corners. But if there is one theme that looms large across several narrative strands, it is immigration; out of Ethiopia and into Europe. Beshir who was born in Mexico after her parents fled Ethiopia appears fascinated, weighed down even, by the ideas of uprooting and displacement as well as the ghosts that they invariably give rise to.

That pesky question of what exactly qualifies as an African film continues to be a relevant one, tricky too. Beshir has said she considers herself most at home in her native hometown of Harar even though she is resident in New York City. Home keeps on calling.

For Camille Nielsson, the Danish filmmaker behind the magnificent documentary, *President*, the

connection to Zimbabwe, the country where she has made two films now is more tenuous but no less powerful.

Scoring unprecedented access to top political players as with *Democrats*, her award winning 2014 documentary, Nielsson conducts a comprehensive cinematic postmortem on the electoral process that led to the emergence of the Emmerson Mnangagwa administration following the fall of Robert Mugabe. *President* shouldn't make for such thrilling viewing but in Nielsson's capable hands, the film rises to the level of must-see cinema, contributing in its own way to Zimbabwe's film discourse.

President was a hit within Sundance's controlled spaces- where it won a special jury prize for verité filmmaking- but now has to find its place in a world that is consciously advocating for underrepresented communities to be able to tell their own stories.

Nielsson acknowledges her immense privilege, plus the very real danger inherent for local Zimbabweans looking to film political documentaries such as hers. She believes that in the case of *President*, her outsider status was actually useful in getting the story out. Nielsson tells me, "I'm not saying that *President* could not have been made by a local filmmaker, but I think it would have involved a lot more risk and safety concerns."

Used to be a time when there were worries that African films could hardly compete with their global counterparts. But as the Sundance entries prove, those days may be long gone. The critics have been near universal in their praise and so have the festival juries and industry awarding bodies. Since Sundance, *Lizard* has been nominated for the BAFTAs in the short film category. And Behir's *Faya Dayi* only recently was announced winner of the grand jury prize at Switzerland's Visions du Réel.

On its part, *Night of the Kings*, perhaps the most accessible of the films, became a breakout hit after Neon signed on to take on distribution duties in the United States. The film was shortlisted in the international film category at the Oscars.

Lacôte is pleased with the reception so far but also far from surprised. He says to me, confidence oozing out of every word, "As a director, I waited for this moment for a long time."

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.