

Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

Discussant's Comments
by
Stephen Lyon
(Durham University, UK)

on
"Accept No Limitations": Expressions of Diasporic Identity in Nigerian Idol.

9-23 July 2013

Firstly, I'd like to thank Tess for providing such an interesting paper, which provides the basis for a rich and useful conversation about diaspora and diasporic identity. Secondly, I have to admit that while I am a massive fan of Bollywood and Hollywood (I probably shouldn't really admit to liking the latter, but I don't pretend to have sophisticated taste in films or television), my knowledge of Nollywood (the Nigerian film and television industry) was considerably more superficial prior to reading Tess' engaging paper. So in addition to thanking Tess for providing the paper, I'd like to thank her for giving me a crash course in Nollywood-- something which I will now capitalise on when looking for good films to watch in the future!

Like many people on this list, I suspect, I have to admit to being something of an anti-fan of the Pop Idol genre. I have had friends who watched these shows over the years, however, so I am very familiar with the genre and am only marginally embarrassed to admit that I could even trot out a few names of some of the prominent contestants. What Tess describes sounds infinitely better than the UK version, however, and not only because she makes a compelling case that there is more going on than the equivalent of a cover tune open mic night. Where the British Pop Idol seems to have attracted rather unimaginative performers and judges (admittedly from my very limited viewing), who seek to reproduce fairly banal versions of past pop songs, the contestants on Nigerian Idol seem to be creatively playing with genres in both the musical and non-musical performances. Tess follows recent diaspora theorists, notably Tsagarousianou, in arguing that media are critical to an understanding of the complex processes of material, cultural and mental exchange. Tess argues that close examination of the performances of contestants and judges on Nigerian Idol allow a more nuanced understanding not only of how normative diasporic identity concepts delineate what a diaspora can and should look like, but also what a diaspora actually looks like through the interactions taking place between diasporic communities through media (p. 70-71).

I'd like to start the discussion by raising what seem to me to be two of the most intriguing ideas from this paper. The first relates to the idea that role of media in shaping diaspora and diasporic identity and the notion that there might be diasporic identities, which are defined not by myth of common origin or homeland, but rather shared relationship to media. The second is Tess' examples of how Nigerian Idol contestants and judges demonstrate and transgress normative concepts of diasporic identity.

Tess argues that essentialised definitions of diaspora based on common origin, while not irrelevant, may be of little use in understanding how contemporary Diasporas are formed and maintained. The

impact of Nollywood exports on pan-African, Caribbean and North American identity construction provide an interesting example of what she seems to be arguing. The audience for Nollywood films is not restricted to Nigerian migrants or people with some family history from Nigeria. Nollywood films are broadcast without sound to audiences who don't speak the languages used in the original films and they seem to resonate beyond any specific Nigerian diaspora (in the old fashioned sense that Tess is suggesting we must critique carefully). This is a fascinating idea and one that I think might provide a useful basis for other research. Clearly, there is something to what she says-- the export of Nollywood, Bollywood and Hollywood all resonate far beyond the national target audience that the producers frequently have in mind-- though of course they have all sought international audiences more or less explicitly in their products. In the case of Bollywood, the one that I am more familiar with, there has been a concerted effort in recent decades to spread the Bollywood influence beyond the South Asian origin communities around the world. Films like *Monsoon Wedding* are very clearly Bollywood products trying to appeal to non-South Asians. British South Asian filmmakers have also demonstrated a fairly reliable ability to capture diverse audiences, notably the films of Gurinder Chadha (*Bhaji on the Beach* and *Bride and Prejudice* being two of her most well known films which combined explicit elements of Bollywood). I'm sure that many on this list could provide a far more comprehensive and useful summary of the impact of Bollywood films on non-South Asian identity in Britain in particular and more widely in the English speaking world generally, so I won't try to make a full blown comparison here. I only want to note that I think that Tess raises an important and intriguing point about the capacity of these types of media to create, or at least impact on, identity. I think that Tess is right to say that such identity impact is not restricted to the traditionally bounded and identified diaspora populations with which such media are associated. Being a rather simple empirical fellow, though, my question on this point is how one might go about demonstrating that such identities are diasporic identities? I am entirely sympathetic to what Tess is arguing, but I think perhaps this point in the paper is largely suggestive and would need some more evidence to flesh out the point-- if indeed she wants to make this point in the way I've summarised here.

The real strength of the paper, in my view, is in Tess' detailed examination of the ways in which the contestants play with various linguistic and other cultural identity markers. It's interesting that the apparent primary audience of Nigerian Idol is the wider British population, and not solely those of Nigerian or African descent (p. 73-74). So presumably the producers have consciously played with cultural representations of Africans, Nigerians, Caribbean and African American to produce something which captures the imagination of people regardless of their own a priori knowledge about Nigeria or West Africa. The selection of judges is indicative of such a goal through the inclusion of an African American singer, dancer and DJ (Jeffrey Daniel). The contestants also do their part and take on musical and linguistic styles from an eclectic range of sources. One of the contestants she describes, Daniel Agagha, a 21 year old from Nigeria's south east Delta region chose a Jamaican musical genre and in his farewell interview adopted a Jamaican speech pattern that was compatible with his choice of musical style. Another example Tess provides is that of Glory Oriakhi, from Edo state in Nigeria. This is perhaps the more challenging and interesting test case for Tess' argument. Oriakhi was successful at getting to the final ten contestants. Throughout the run of the show she performed songs following various prescribed themes (disco, movie soundtrack, Nigerian, African, Michael Jackson and Abba were all used to define weekly themes, apparently). When she was finally voted out by the public she chose to sing a song called 'Joromi' by Sir Victor Uwaifo. Sir Victor Uwaifo is from the same state as Oriakhi, Edo State. Tess states that this is an expression of Oriakhi's Edo identity and her identification with Nigerian expressive arts (p. 77). This seems to me to be somewhat at odds with the production company's commercial objective of creating a show, which appeals beyond Nigerian and other African audiences. What made this expression of local identity all the more powerful was that the remaining contestants

chose to join Oriakhi as back up singers. The song is apparently very well known and popular in Nigeria. Tess argues that Oriakhi demonstrates the hybrid nature of human beings. Oriakhi, Tess argues that such 'indigenous perspectives of identity represent a cultural vocabulary that is beyond a corporeal existence' (p. 77). She then goes on to say that Uwaifo, the author of the song 'Joromi', in a phone interview, says that 'tribal voices' can represent a 'unique expressiveness' of what is in people's minds (p. 77). The specific sentiments used by Oriakhi in the song, 'Joromi', are apparently not translatable outside of the indigenous language, but will be understood by members of Bini (Edo) culture. The idea that there are simultaneous messages being inferred does not trouble me. It is certainly entirely reasonable to suggest that diverse audiences may all be moved by particular performances in radically different ways. Let me play devil's advocate for a moment and suggest that the example of Oriakhi's final performance strikes me as somewhat undermining of the argument that the media produces a diaspora or a diasporic identity. Rather, it looks as if the media may well play a vital role in the processes of exchange which are indeed critical to diaspora, but that the media in the absence of all of the traditional stuff of diaspora theory is incapable of invoking what Uwaifo says is powerful about 'tribal voices'. In contrast, it seems to me that the example of films produced by South Asian diaspora, often in collaboration with Bollywood, may offer a less problematic example of precisely the point that Tess wants to make about the role of media in material, cultural and mental exchange.

I raise these two points by way of the start of what I am sure will be a very useful conversation about diaspora and media. I know that there are others on this list far more knowledgeable about Nollywood and African media industries more broadly and I am very much looking forward to reading what they make both of this paper and the implications of Tess thought provoking arguments for regional and continental media.

It remains for me to thank Tess once more and to hand over to her. She can, and I'm sure will, correct any misunderstandings I may have and will no doubt clarify my uncertainties about how her arguments tie into what is obviously a much larger piece of work about diaspora.

Steve