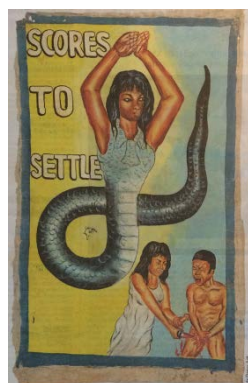


Article in De Volkskrant of thursday 9th of june 2016 by Pauline Kleijer



Before TV entered into the Ghanaian homes, films were shown in small cinemas advertised through hand painted posters. A selection of these posters is exhibited in Rotterdam.

Men with turtle heads, women giving birth to monstrous babies, bloody beheadings, banknotes spitting zombies, the walls of the Kunsthal (Art Hall) in Rotterdam are covered with it. More than 90 Ghanaian film posters are on show in the exhibition "Bloodywood". These are unique pieces, each hand painted, with images leaving little to one's imagination.



A poster advertising the movie *Scores to settle* is exemplary. A woman with the body of a snake is in the centre of the picture, while in the right bottom corner a still bleeding man has his penis severed. In the light yellow background you still

see letters giving away the material the poster is painted on: an empty flower bag, turned inside out and ripped open.

The posters in the Kunsthal, already quite overwhelming, are only a small part of the collection of 52-year old collector Mandy Elsas. In 1999 Elsas traveled for the first time to Ghana for his Amsterdam shop De Emaillkeizer (the Enamel Emperor), a shop with all kinds of household utensils and commodities from West Africa. In Ghana he was immediately caught by the colorful and fantastic posters in the streets.

This typical Ghanaian promotional material was already on its way out; the small neighborhood cinemas where popular films were shown on video had already been overtaken by private home cinemas, and faded prints replaced hand painted posters.



During his travels Elsas saved from extinction as many posters as possible and now has a collection of about 750. They give a fantastic impression of the type of films popular in West Africa: martial art movies from Hong Kong, musical melodrama from Bollywood, but also films from the region with local stars and bizarre stories appealing to a broad audience.

Both in Ghana and Nigeria film production showed an enormous growth because of low costs of video production, while by having them travel around small neighborhood cinemas producers could earn a bit of money. In both countries hundreds of films were made, while before hardly any movies were made at all.

One poster was usually enough to attract public for a theater with just a couple of chairs. Of course the poster had to draw attention and hence the emphasis on the bizarre. Hence the emphasis on a man transforming in a vulture, or a woman with gigantic breasts –result of a curse of the gods. Even Ghanaian posters of Hollywood films, also exhibited in the Rotterdam Kunsthal, are much more shocking than their western counterparts. For example, Jennifer Lopez is completely strangled by an anaconda the size of a man in the poster for horror movie *Anaconda* (1997) while the original poster only shows snake eyes.



‘In fact the posters are more exciting than the films’, says to Mandy Elsas. In the course of the years he saw a number of Ghanaian films, but they failed to evoke the same emotion as the posters made by the artists, which he often managed to track down and with whom he was able to establish contact. ‘The nice thing about these posters is that they cross certain borders. They exceed our Western way of thinking, it is difficult to follow. It surpasses our fantasy.’

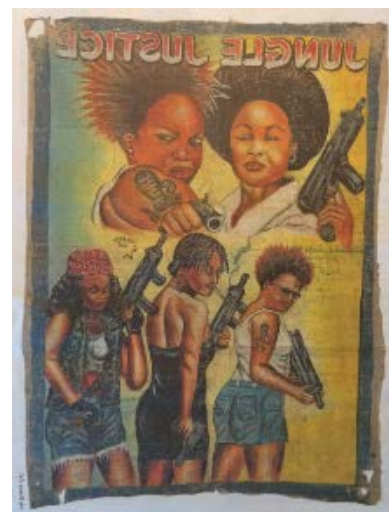
Elsas is no scientist, he remarks: ‘I am more a man of the street, just like the artists which made the posters.’ To get to know more about the films behind the posters, he approached Professor Birgit Meyer, an anthropologist who studied African cinema. For this exhibition Meyer made a number of film descriptions and contributed also an article to the catalog Elsas published.

Bloodywood is the title of this beautiful and comprehensive catalogue; Mandy’s own variation on the nicknames of Ghanaian and Nigerian film productions Ghallywood and Nollywood.

Emphasis on the occult in Ghanaian and Nigerian films, writes Meyer, is related to the very specific view on the battle between good and bad. In a Ghanaian film it is not unusual that a man transforms in a snake, has sex with a woman who starts to throw up banknotes and in the end, after coughing up some coins dies a painful death. Usually Christian values overcome in this type of films, but black magic and the supernatural play an important part. The films are indeed as extravagant as the posters suggest, although it happens that the artists exaggerate a bit. Not always did they view the film, sometimes they based themselves on a summary and also at times, smoking marijuana helped for inspiration, as one of the artists in the book *Bloodywood* puts it.

Now the market for hand painted posters has collapsed, the artists have to look for other work.

For collector Mandy



Elsas the exhibition is not only an image of a lost era, he hopes it will bring the artists new assignments. For this reason he added their contact data in the catalog, he says. ‘It is painful to see the hard time they are in. I want to see how I can help them to new assignments. Who knows what will come of this exhibition.’