

Delta Sigma
Theta Sorority, Inc.
as Filmmaker

The Making and Demise of *Countdown at Kusini*

By Robin Means Coleman

Abstract: This article examines the call for African Americans to take charge of their media images by exploring the 1970s case of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., an African American public service organization. Delta Sigma Theta entered into media activism and made history by becoming the first Black women's organization to create and produce a feature-length film, *Countdown at Kusini*—a film developed expressly as a counter-narrative to blaxploitation films, as well as negative representations of Blacks in media.

Keywords: Blacks, blaxploitation, *Countdown at Kusini*, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

About all this film directed by Ossie Davis has going for it is progressive politics. [...] Clearly one of the problems with the film is inadequate financing. [...] Go see it if you have a chance, but do so with no illusions.

— D. G. (52)

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. was founded in January 1913 at Howard University as an organization for college-educated women. Delta's founders established, as part of its charter, a service agenda with the goal of assisting blacks of the diaspora in achieving their political, social, and economic objectives. Today, Delta has approximately 200,000 members, making it the largest Black sorority in the world ("Delta"). Delta's history of public service, including, support for the Anti-Lynching Bill of 1922, bookmobiles, scholarship funds, and voter registration, took a different turn under Lillian Pierce Benbow, its fifteenth national president.



Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee: Two key players in the important but failed *Countdown at Kusini*. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

Benbow believed that media images of Blackness—particularly those found in blaxploitation films—were largely negative and that the organization could effect positive change by addressing stereotypical imagery in its social action goals. Benbow elaborated on the sorority's position in a 1975 interview:

[W]e saw that with movies, and any of the media, you have the usual stereotype presentation of Black women [. . .] either she's got a handkerchief on her head, humming her song, 'Jesus, I'll be home by and by,' or she's somebody's prostitute or in some other way dehumanized." (Peterson 30)

Wrote Holly, "The [depiction] problem will begin to be solved when Blacks gain control over the making of their own films" (127). As such, Benbow moved media activism to the top of the sorority's public service agenda. The sorority also had the ideological support of other Black organizations. For example, the president of the Hollywood chapter of the NAACP, Junius Griffin, stated in 1972:

now that the movie industry has discovered the Black market, we have the obligation to insist that the door be opened all the way. We must work in the creative and production part of the industry, as well as participate in the distribution of films. Our contribution must be more than consumption at the box offices to see a few black actors. Our rewards in return should be strong images of a proud people and increased purchasing power from our investments, our creative energies, and our employment. (Griffin 19)

Delta would attempt its most ambitious public service project with the production of the full-length, Hollywood-style feature, *Countdown at Kusini*. Starring Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Greg Morris, the film was to have "[the] political import to counter the influence of the 'blaxploitation' movies that offered little but stereotypical images of Blacks" (Giddings 9).

The film possessed both a novel plot and a creative approach to securing financial backing. *Countdown at Kusini* was a pan-African melodrama that centered on a rebellion against a corrupt colonialist government in the fictional African nation of Fahari. To finance the

film, all 85,000 members of the sorority contributed approximately \$100 each to the endeavor, for a total contribution of \$800,000. Benbow boasted:

our film marks a first-time effort in the history of this country that a Black women's organization has said, "not only are we concerned with the negative images of Black people on film, but we are willing to put whatever resources we have on the line to do something about it." This film represents women around the country committing themselves, not in terms of pledges but in terms of hard dollars! (qtd. in Peterson 30)

It was believed that the film could also solve a number of other image problems. Ideally, the film would not only work to repair the media's treatment of Blacks and, by extension, repair their social image, but it would also improve the public profile of Black sororities and fraternities that seemed to only generate press attention during hazing scandals. With the unique arts and media exper-

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tise of some of the sorority members—Leontyne Price (singer), Lena Horne (entertainer), Ruby Dee (actress), Nikki Giovanni (writer), Roberta Flack (singer), Ethel Payne (journalist), and Charlayne Hunter Gault (journalist)—it was also presumed that the organization was well-positioned to "expose the [media] 'system' that was designed to denigrate [Blackness]" (Giddings 288).

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Delta made the most of its relationship with those in the media and entertainment industries by asking them to look for viable scripts. Two notables approached by the sorority were actors Dee, a Delta, and Davis, her husband. Regarding the selection of the film, Davis stated, "they came to us [. . .] I happened to have a son-in-law [Ladi Ladebo, a Nigerian] at that time who was interested in filmmaking and he had rights to a story called *Countdown at Kusini* (Berry and Berry 165). Davis appeared to be uniquely positioned to deliver the imagistic and profit rewards the sorority desired. Davis's direction credits included the famed *Cotton Comes to Harlem* in 1970 and the praised *Black Girl* in 1972. Ultimately, Davis would co-write the *Countdown at Kusini* screenplay (with actor Al Freeman Jr. and Ladebo), as well as direct and star in the film that would be shot in Lagos, Nigeria.

For Davis, the commitment to a pan-African effort had long been on his personal agenda. In 1935, when he was an eighteen-year-old student at Howard University, he had imagined himself fighting alongside the Ethiopians against Mussolini. In 1942, Davis was stationed in Liberia as a soldier in the U.S. Army (Davis and Dee). In 1970, Davis had assisted in the direction of *Kongi's Harvest*, the first Nigerian feature film, which starred Wole Soyinka. At first, Davis believed that he had the resources that would make *Countdown at Kusini* a success,

Not only did my son-in-law, the company manager [of the Davis family corporation Rolling Ventures], promise us the benefit of his kinship and connections in Nigeria, but also I was chairman of the American Delegation to the Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, known as FESTAC, soon to be held in Nigeria, which gave me access to power in high places. Surely things would go well. The hell they did! (Davis and Dee 370)

By late 1974, filming in Nigeria proved to be a significant, costly obstacle. Davis recounts, "when the crew arrived in Nigeria and saw the working conditions, they insisted on more pay.

[. . .] On another occasion, we were to film a scene in a village some distance from Lagos. We set up for the shot; then we were told we had to wait for the arrival of the chief, which took half a day. When the chief came, he refused to give his permission until he had been paid” (Davis and Dee 370). Costs began to mount, and Nigerian backers failed to provide their promised financial support. Davis soon realized his \$800,000 estimate for the film—the sum raised by the sorority—would not be nearly enough, and tried to make up the shortfall with his own money. *Countdown at Kusini*, he said, “was a labor of love, but love ain’t the right way to make a motion picture” (370). Even greater difficulties regarding the film were ahead.

As investors in a film, the membership demanded regular updates regarding its progress. When the reports indicated delays or rising costs, Delta’s leaders were bombarded with suggestions from members on how best to proceed, or with calls to withdraw from the project. Benbow detailed her challenges:

Since financing a film is so different from our past activities, we had to impress upon the psyche of the membership a different kind of capability. [. . .] The members say, “we’ve always been service oriented. We’ve always given [book] baskets, so why are we now in the movies?” (Peterson 30, 32)

In addition, Benbow’s term as president of Delta would end in 1975, a year before the film’s scheduled premiere. Thus, Benbow needed to be sure the film project would continue to move ahead under new leadership. A year before the film’s completion, Jeanne Noble, Benbow’s predecessor, revealed her fears:

if *Countdown* does make money, even by being a “sleeper;” then we’re in business. [. . .] If it doesn’t, there’d be no question about the fact that it would all be over. We have the new administration coming in this August, but I wouldn’t even wait until then to resign. I feel that when I said, “Let’s go,” along with it went our credibility as leaders of the sorority, win, lose, or draw. (Peterson 32)

In 1974, Davis was still optimistic about the film’s potential, stating, “for the first time, a Black film has

Black funding, producers, directors, writers, and technical people working together;” with non-Black participation occurring mainly through postproduction jobs (Terrell D9). He also hoped to obtain a Black distributor for the film, understanding that the right distributor was crucial to a film’s success. Davis’s earlier film, *Kongi’s Harvest*, encountered distribution problems because, he argued, Black films without sex and violence do not get advertising, promotion, and distribution from the white-controlled media industry (Berry and Berry). Nevertheless, as much as the

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sorority and Davis wanted the film to be, from beginning to end, an all-Black production, there were the realities of 1970s filmmaking—non-Blacks controlled much of the business end of the media industry, particularly the arenas of distribution and exhibition.

Davis and the sorority eventually conceded that the distribution of the film had to come from a major film studio. Eventually, David Begelman, then-president of Columbia Pictures, agreed to distribute *Countdown at Kusini*. Nevertheless, it was apparent to Davis as well as others on the production team that such an agreement was a catch-22. The film, without the backing of a major film distributor, would be a guaranteed failure. However, evidence showed that

film companies lacked a commitment to fully distribute Black films.

Ladebo, armed with a business/marketing degree from New York University and experience in marketing, lobbied for a target marketing plan for *Countdown at Kusini*’s distribution. In a 2006 interview, Ladebo explained his marketing strategy for *Countdown at Kusini*: “To start, you zero in on the top fifty markets in Black neighborhoods. Then you lease the movie houses, because there weren’t many multiplexes and theaters in malls in those communities at that time. [. . .] Put the movie in there; book it for a good run; you raise your money.” Instead, the sorority pursued a more novel marketing approach, which, as Ladebo recalls, was a strategy that the film industry was not prepared to support: “the film was not taken seriously by theater owners. They did not believe Whites would be interested in *Kusini*, and they weren’t going to tie up a screen on a Saturday and lose profits. So they put it on once, on one screen, on a Wednesday.” Likewise, Davis speculated that Columbia Pictures had to package *Countdown at Kusini* with bigger films to entice theaters to screen it: “[. . .] in order for you to get this film, you have to also take these dogs here” (Berry and Berry 167). Davis maintains, “it could have made money for the Deltas [. . .]. But the exhibitor? What do they care about the Deltas trying to build up a Black audience?” (168).

Expectations were high for the film’s March 30, 1976, celebrity gala screening in Washington, D.C. The screening followed a party at the Museum of African Art with several hundred guests, including congresswoman Barbara Jordan (D-TX), *Countdown at Kusini* stars Dee, Davis, and Morris, Bob Powell of Kraft Foods, several senators, and Benbow. In a portent of the film’s critical reception, Dorothy Gilliam, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, noted that Morris “seemed visibly nervous as guests were leaving the museum for the theater” (F1).

With sorority members’ attendance alone, Delta had hoped the first week’s national box office for *Countdown at Kusini* would be approximately \$450,000, a sum that would have been

record-breaking for an independently produced Black film. However, the film encountered daunting competition. On April 7, 1976, when *Countdown at Kusini* was released nationally to the general public, it faced a formidable film lineup: *All The President's Men* (Academy Award nominee Best Picture; Academy Award winner Screen Play Based on Material from Another Media), *Family Plot* (Edgar Award winner Best Motion Picture), *The Bad News Bears* (Writers Guild of America Award winner Best Comedy Written Directly for the Screen), *Taxi Driver* (Academy Award nominee Best Picture) and the black drama/musical *Sparkle*.

In addition, the reviews of the film did not help Delta's cause. Vincent Canby's *New York Times* review of *Countdown at Kusini* was particularly flaccid: "it's a movie that wants to be 'serious' about African political aspirations while also being entertaining. Though it tries hard, it's neither [. . .] (79). Another *New York Times* review was far more scathing, describing *Countdown at Kusini* as a "subpar adventure" and possessing a script that "invite[s] the use of nearly constant music to drown out the dialogue." Worse, according to the same review, "compounding the troubles are the occasional mismatched shots, and, in effect an epilogue that vitiates its educational strivings" (Van Gelder 10). Joel Dreyfuss, a critic for the *Washington Post*, offered a similarly negative review that included passages such as "the viewer may begin to wish the actors in this melodrama about revolution in Africa would get out of the way," and "while its intentions are good, its results are primarily boring and pointless" (B17). Alice Walker, a Delta member, was especially pointed in her critique:

Nearly all the flaws in *Kusini* are both obvious and instructive: [. . .] Ruby Dee's Leah, Motapo's tough, beautiful corevolutionist, is often distractingly overdressed for her role in a poor, embattled country. [. . .] The film's major flaw is the casting of Greg Morris (who in his plasticity is reminiscent of Richard Nixon) [He] is so awkward and jerky [. . .] that the audience, both times I saw the film, chuckled at his efforts. Another flaw is the obligatory put-down of "the ugly honky woman" [. . .] (45)

Unfortunately for the sorority, exhibitors pulled *Countdown at Kusini* within days of its release—preventing even Deltas from seeing the film—quickly replacing it with bigger films. It was hoped that *Countdown at Kusini* would ultimately gross \$7 to \$10 million. The final box office take was a paltry \$145,322 (50 Top Grossing 24).

Countdown at Kusini's critical and box office failure has left many, over the

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years, to speculate where the sorority went wrong. Lynnette Taylor, a former Delta executive director, opines:

[. . .] the problem was that we were all novices. We didn't have the margin of funds needed when problems arose. We really didn't understand distribution. [. . .] I think that it should be accepted as historical fact that we made the effort. We were the only group that I know of who attempted to deal with a film that talked about issues such as the effect of multinational corporations and cartels in Africa. It was a courageous thing to do. (Giddings 292)

Ladebo recalls that although "I was deeply proud of them and what they accomplished; it was the general national release of the film" that posed a problem (Interview, 2006). In the end, gone were Delta's \$800,000, Davis's uncharted contributions, and an additional \$500,000 later donated by

Johnson Products, an African-American owned hair care and cosmetics company, and an anonymous civil rights organization (Berry and Berry).

Decades after the film, Dee holds herself personally accountable for letting down herself and her sorority:

I try to forgive myself for not shouting, "Hold on! I can tell you what we need to do. We must find a much simpler story, one close to the sensibilities and concerns of Black women. [. . .] In this brave first effort, let us [. . .] get permission from the city for a vacant corner lot—[. . .] getting the unions to do waivers, and perhaps contribute. Furthermore, it can be accomplished with the original investment" [. . .] I try to forgive myself for throwing up my hands and going all faint, whispering, "Oh, no, not me. [. . .] Let my husband, let my son-in-law, let the men do it" [. . .]. (Davis and Dee 373)

Despite the failure of *Countdown at Kusini* Delta believed the project fulfilled its mission of educational and political enlightenment, and economic empowerment and self-sufficiency. Still, it may be questioned if Delta's response to blaxploitation came just a bit too late. Just two months before the premiere of *Countdown at Kusini*, the *Washington Post* reported, "the blaxploitation film is ebbing as a major staple of Hollywood fare. [. . .] Black-White confrontations are being replaced by Blacks interacting among themselves, or with Whites. And the latter are being portrayed as complete human beings—good and evil, rich and poor, smart and dumb" (West G9). In the same article, Sidney Poitier, director and Academy Award-winning actor also was predicting the genre's demise:

[. . .] but to get a constant diet of Black super heroes beating up on white Mafia guys is infantile, and it doesn't address itself to our intelligence. The expectations of Black audiences have been expanded considerably over the last few years, expanded and dimensionalized. They want to see the honest struggles they can recognize as being in part symbolic of their lives. It's time to move on. (G9)

However, the *Washington Post* and Poitier may have been premature, given the 1975–79 releases of blaxploitation films such as *Bucktown*, *Mandingo*, *Petey Wheatstraw*, and *Soul Vengeance*. These movies barely registered on film

critics' radar. As such, *Countdown at Kusini* encountered far greater critical scrutiny than its far less narratively and ideologically ambitious counterparts. In the end, Rob Cohen, producer of *The Bingo Long All-Stars and the Motor Kings*, best explains the fate of films such as *Countdown at Kusini*:

people aren't going to buy [social themes]. They want a shark marauding off the coast of a vacation spot or 'The Sting.' If there's one thing an audience doesn't want, it's a message. If there's one thing beyond that, it's a Black message. (West G9)

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