

## Nigerian Culture from the Lens of Nollywood

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### Abstract

When one talks about the major film producing countries today, it is no longer news that Nigeria's Nollywood has surpassed Hollywood of America as it ranks second largest film industry after Bollywood of India in terms of volumes of films produced yearly. Although Nollywood movies have exported Nigeria's culture with regard to language, fashion, music, food, arts and crafts, a lot need to be done as the negatives outweigh the positives. People in Nigeria and abroad have raised divergent views about the themes and content of Nollywood films which graphically celebrate rituals and other societal vices degrading to the nation. This paper takes into cognizance

that movies mirror the society but argues that if the mirror is cracked it will certainly reflect a distorted image. Whereas films from other countries sell their culture and national ideologies to its diverse viewers, it would appear that Nollywood narratives give a wrong impression of Nigeria to the viewing public under the cover of culture. Conscious efforts should therefore be made by all stakeholders to ensure that the filmmaker is professionally competent and well equipped as he exercises his social responsibility in line with his economic interests in the movie business.

### Introduction

Film is the most creative medium to showcase a peoples' culture because film has the capability to portray the society utilizing different genres such as drama, comedy, horror, thriller, war, religious matters, romance, documentaries, women and children, adventure, action, history, western, biography, musicals and several others. A film may also explore within its content various themes such as rituals, love, jealousy, envy, life and death, marriage, corruption, witchcraft, cultism, voodoo, drugs, democracy, education and much more. The Nigerian home video industry popularly known as Nollywood does not limit itself to one particular genre or theme but has extensively enriched the content of its productions without any limitations. James gives a long list of themes, issues and subject matters treated in the various genres to include:

Marriage, adultery, polygamy, male child syndrome, love, inordinate pursuit of

wealth, tyranny, politics, childlessness, impotence infertility, drug trafficking, prostitution, betrayal, witchcraft, armed robbery, drunkenness, justice/injustice, religion, health matters, widowhood, poverty, stinginess, sibling rivalry, land disputes etc.

The above list though not exhaustive is a vast repertoire of titles covering societal issues of our daily existence which are at the disposal of the film practitioner to craft his art of story-telling in the most compelling and mind arresting manner. Shaka submits that:

These films evidently portray us as superstitious people trapped in the web of traditional African belief systems in the age of modernity when the instrumental power of rational reasoning should prevail. They no doubt make us uncomfortable like the proverbial psychoanalytic return of the repressed which continue to torment us however hard we try to banish them to the subconscious realm (17).

Going by the numerous home video films produced, it is obvious, is that the thematic focus

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ranges from love, seduction, and adultery stories to money, power, cultism, witchcraft, greed and other worst negatives ever imagined. Unfortunately too, when a storyline is picked upon by a producer, others follow rehashing the same theme with boring monotony that one could easily predict the sequence of the film. Nollywood films explore various subject matters that deal with the moral dilemmas facing the African in contemporary society. While these movies promote the different religions: the Christian and Islamic faiths, others are overtly evangelical. The issues of religious diversity are also encountered in tribal mixed marriages as in the popular film *Not Without My Daughter* which explores a strong theme in the Nigerian society where ironically unity in diversity is preached. The religious differences in *Not Without My Daughter* examine a Muslim and a Christian who want to marry but have to encounter several obstacles on the way. Evangelist Helen Ukpabio aptly sums up the benefits of “hallelujah video” in an interview with Okome this way:

The video film has been helping us a lot in a bid to evangelize people. The messages we convey in these video films are specific. It is to the glory of God and the Lord Jesus Christ(2).

The themes are affected by regional cultures as much as they are by tastes. Occasionally, they are influenced by the ideas that a few notable producers believe could win over the mainstream. Nollywood movies are classified to be over loaded with pleasure and entertainment values for their own sake where issues of right and wrong are treated superficially with little or no analysis. The average Nigerian home video viewer must have been exposed to dozens of movies with repeated themes about witchcraft, wife, husband or girl friend or man friend snatching, infertility or childlessness in marriage, and dispute over legacy or inheritance. In filmmaking, each movie presents the audience with role models, ideal ways of doing things, negative traits and an implied morality based on the filmmakers' perception. The film should have an ideological slant, a perspective which gives the filmmaker the privilege to shape his content. Given the fact that in real life, most of us are either liberals

or conservatives, it becomes an imperative that such works reflect a stand that could advance the viewer's knowledge. Rather, Nollywood narratives foreground bourgeois lifestyles in terms of expensive homes, cars, dresses, aspirations, affluence and others with limited attention paid to poverty, corruption, government inaction or failed infrastructures. James states that:

The major issues of our time such as joblessness the legal system, justice, equity, freedom, politics, education, medicine, housing, food, drug addiction, child abuse and trafficking are still begging for serious treatment.

It is generally believed that the cinema is a very powerful cultural tool and institution which reflects and inflects the discourse of nationhood and societal issues. Culturally, the themes earlier mentioned are relevant to African traditions but the extent to which treatment is given to each subject matter connotes a negative impression; therefore, rather than being repressive, it enforces the local traditional beliefs and rites as experienced in Kingsley Ogoro's *Widow* (2005) and Jimi Odumosu's *The Mourning After* (2004). These compelling narratives tackle the treatment and disenfranchisement of widows who undergo inhuman treatment and the arduous rituals they must submit to in the name of tradition. In general, these stories reflect the social and cultural dynamics of modern life; the old versus the new, the aspirations, fears and changing attitudes to love, sex and economic survival in a post colonial society with a challenging economy. *The Mourning After* (2004) and *Widow* (2005) are dramatized cultural practices in some parts of Nigeria which offer no protection against the weak such as women and children. Under the cover of culture, our respective cultures dehumanize women and children, treating them like property because their husbands and fathers are dead. In the civilized 21<sup>st</sup> century, one would expect the state to do away with such wicked cultural practices by punishing the miscreant and setting the captive free; but, rather, the woman faces a double penalty of losing her husband and the family bread winner as well as facing physical and psychological trauma. According to Utomi:

Burial rites for her husband meant she had to spend one year in the village mourning his passing. That would be one year without income at all. Those who enforced the practices gave no care to how she and six children already drowning in deprivation would survive on no income at all. If she was lucky, she would find enough charitable people to give her handouts and keep them from starving to death. The lady's husband's clan, managed to accuse her of failing to take good care of her husband while he lived and of failing to alert the elders quickly enough of his death. Though she found the accusations outrageous, she lacked the power to do anything about it. She was having her initiation into the inner sanctum of absolute poverty, the realm of powerlessness. She was fined a total of nearly 200 dollars, nearly seven month's wages she would not get a chance to earn in the following year. She would technically be unable to get off mourning until she had paid the fine.

Film story lines in *The Morning After* (2004), and *Widow* (2005) may not be palatable filmic materials for international consumption; suffice to say that such are the popular themes that sell among the urban and rural uneducated poor which Larkin (18) describes as fantastic response to the insecurity and vulnerability of everyday life, a common frame in which popular stories are told in Nigeria.

### **Culture versus the occult economy**

The success of any Hollywood movie is determined by the audience response at the Box Office. It is for this reason that Hollywood studios repeatedly reproduce the types of film genres considered to be most popular, with themes dealing with central societal conflicts, problems and concerns of the audience. Similarly, Nollywood explores societal themes which address armed robbery, law and other social imbalance, the powerful and the weak, the rich versus the poor, cultism, avarice, affluence and several others. According to Amaka Igwe, content is very significant in promoting African culture:

In Nigeria, you can trace your relationship through your cousin; if you have a problem, they are there to solve it for you. There is a strong bond between a child and his mother's family. These are things that are totally Nigerian and those are things we want to teach to the outside world.

The contents of Nollywood films are reflective of the Nigerian society. *Film director Inoje* defends the predominance of rituals:

There are no pretences of trying to copy Hollywood because we can't copy Hollywood. We do not have the means, the technology, sometimes, I laugh when people say we have too many rituals in our films. But let's be realistic. Before you move from one street in Nigeria to the end, and enter ten bedrooms, you are most likely to bring out concoctions, pots and jujus of several shapes from those houses. An African man is either taking his problems to the church or to a native doctor and that is what we try to portray in our film.

Occult themes in video films might be regarded simply as the way people talk about current societal issues in order to encourage debate and open discussions. The films, therefore, become a veritable platform from which the issues that concern the daily lives of the people are addressed. It is also true that some producers specialize in films that depict the dismal cultural practices of the lucrative black market for human tissues and organs. These films portray the ritual murders and sale of human organs motivated by the rules of supply and demand that govern the underground dark economy. The following examples of rituals would suffice to substantiate the above. *Blood Money* depicts cruelly more than Norman Bates' knife in Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Psycho* as a woman is brutally murdered, only for her breasts and tongue to be cut off for rituals. In *Suicide Mission*, the viewer encounters horrifying scenes of sexual intercourse with a dead person. The display of extreme violence, sex and its component parts for rituals underscore man's search for power and materialism in an environment divided by a rift of affluence and

the poor bereft of an appropriate dignified place in life.

The works of art are the products of the environment as juju men cannot produce money out of nothing. But this transformation of human body parts is never shown or staged clearly; it is only assumed and taken for granted. Camaroff explains the economy of the occult:

Occult economy may be taken, at its most general, to denote the deployment of magical means for material ends or, more expansively the conjuring of wealth by resort to inherently mysterious techniques whose principles of operation are neither transparent nor explicable in conventional terms. These techniques, moreover, often involve the destruction of others and their capacity to create value.

The occult economy in the Nigerian home video provides the viewer with the sense of quick wealth while those that deal with morality and religion enjoin viewers to turn away from things of the flesh by offering them a redemptive option in Christ Jesus. With the various genres, themes and content of Nollywood movies, the Nigerian Home Video productions do not only target the “street audiences” but use the medium as a means for popular expression of a peoples' culture, their struggles, challenges and celebrations of life. According to Ajibade:

As popular visual art forms, the Nigerian video films take on themes from popular social life politics, mythologies, events, fears, anxieties rumours, etc, – and other experiences that the masses share across the post colonies. Films such as *Glamour Girls 1 & 2* (1992 & 1994) talk about prostitution, the four-part video *Issakaba* (2001) talks about the link between armed robbery, the occult, ritual murder and corrupt rich men; *Osuofia in London 1&2* (2003 & 2004) dwell on the attractions the local Africans have for Europe and America. Helen Ukpabio's *End of the Wicked* (1999) and Mike Bamiloye's *The God's Are Dead* (2000) use local Christian ideologies to dramatize problems of the

contemporary popular representations of governance and corruption in Nigeria (6).

Today the Nigerian home video is celebrated all over the world because its contents have generated a loose indigenous culture through the mediation of popular identities with local imageries. Most importantly, these films do not project foreign identities but are indigenous with local content and contexts. These films provided the people who have long expected this opportunity of self-portrayal and representation to see themselves on the small or big screen with stories that reflect their everyday conditions, beliefs, fears and hopes in the world's largest Black nation. According to the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji (Dr) Mohammed Sa'ad Abubakar III:

It is worthy of commendation that Nigeria has found a voice in this exclusive list of motion picture and filmmaking countries – a voice which now represents a greater portion of Africa, providing common identity and cultural expression and influences which stimulate great interest in the themes and subjects of their content.... This responsibility demands a strong knowledge base, knowledge of Nigeria, its people, its norms, values, cultures and traditions, history and antecedents, progression and evolution, sensitivities, conducts and visions (11-12).

### **Indigenous language films**

Language as an aspect of communication is the organized system of speech used by human beings to communicate with each other. Although English is widely recognized as Nigeria's lingua franca, folklores, literature and several other translations tend to lose meaning as a result of direct translation from each one of the dialects into the English language. The rise of Hausa films like *Shehu Umar*, *Ruwan Bagaja*, and Ola Balogun's *Ajani Ogun* made in Yoruba language broke the jinx and paved the way for films produced in indigenous languages. The Yoruba travelling theatre is greatly acknowledged for this transformation by pioneer contributors like Adeyemi Afolayan (Ade Love), Hubert Ogunde and Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala). In



recognition of the power of indigenous languages Ladebo confirms that:

What the producers of Yoruba films have proved is the acceptability and market potentials of indigenous language films in Nigeria. It is easy to conclude that if our local film industry is to begin to develop, Nigerian producers may have to take a serious look at making indigenous language entertainment pictures in addition to the English speaking ones.

The Yorubas and the Hausas are at the fore front in the production of language films in Nigeria. More than anything else, language films produce, package and reflect culture. Nigerian language films are very effective in communicating a people's culture because there is no loss of meaning arising from poor translation. Language is the carrier of culture and to ignore this fact is suicidal to a people's culture. It is for this reason that Akinrinade (16) explains that the word Nollywood itself attempts to systematize the notable ethno-lingual and socio-cultural divergences expressed through films in the English language and other indigenous languages like Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Tiv, Urhobo and so on. Some filmmakers like Lancelot Imasuen's *Aduku* (1995), *Ebuwa* (2009); Emem Isong's *Edikan* (2009), *Idomo* (2011) and *Udeme Mmi* (2012); Chris Ioryisa's *Anchovul*, *Orphan*; Nyiekaa Solomon's *Adan WadeKoholga* have sold several copies, an indication of acceptability with a heterogeneous audience. Confirming the views of Akinrinade on the above, it can therefore be asserted that films in indigenous languages still constitute the most vibrant aspect of the industry to date in spite of the wider reach and privileged position of English films.

### How Nollywood films reflect society

The phenomenal growth of the Nigerian film industry has offered the filmmakers numerous opportunities for visual narratives and projections that are reflective of our various collective cultures and the societal issues that occur in our daily life experiences. According to Marshall McLuhan "the medium is the message," the cinema medium with the capacity to impact such messages utilizing both

picture and sound makes it a very powerful tool of communication. It is therefore very pertinent to know how well the Nigerian home video films have been able to interpret and present both our past and present. It is questionable how well or accurate these movies "mirror" or "reflect" the people and the diverse cultures as well as the nation in general. Films are generally known to provide information about the "psychology" of an era and its tensions, conflicts, fears and fantasies. They do so not as a simple representation or mirroring of an extra-cinematic social reality; rather, according to Keller, films refract social discourses and content into specifically cinematic forms which engage audiences in an active process of constructing meaning. Ruminating on the social psychology and reality from films, Deming argues that, 'It is not as mirrors reflect us but rather, as our dreams do that movies most truly reveal the times' (14).

It therefore implies that movies researched, shot, edited and exhibited at a particular time, reproduce dominant ideologies and also contain proto-deconstructive elements that cut across the grain of the ideology the movies promote. We can therefore say that film as an art, reflects the culture of the society that is supposed to mediate in social and national development. The "reflective-projective theory" postulates that media of mass communication are best understood as mirrors of society. They reflect an ambiguous image in which each observer projects or sees visions of them and of the society. According to Benneth,

The media are secondary and derivative, somehow less real than the 'real'. They reflect existing above society and passively mirroring it rather than forming an active and integral part of it. Like a mirror, it is suggested they reflect only what is placed in front of them by the structure of the real itself.

What is reflected should be seen as a mirror of life. It reflects what people do, what they think, how they live, what values they hold, what joys and what sorrows they express and celebrate. It is a full portrait of every aspect of man. While one may be at cross-roads as to what kind of image the Nigerian home video films reflect, the individual or the

society may ponder on the distortion of the “mirrored image”. Like a telescopic zoom lens on the camera, this mirror can project an accurate or distorted image as well as an image that is very vague and ambiguous or one that is more clearly defined. One cannot rule out some ambiguity in the screened image; like in an anamorphic or zoom lens, the field of view may have a narrow or a wide view of the subject matter. Edochie opines that:

The home video only tries to mirror the society and tells it loud and clear that the odds in the society are bad. So people should turn away from them because they are not edifying; they are not spiritually invigorating... No matter how bad a film might be, in terms of tilting to the left, in the end, the forces of light represented by God must overcome, must triumph.

According to Voelker, 'Anation or community is formed by common interests, ideas and culture; by a common image or vision of itself. But to have a common image or vision, there must be one that is seen, understood and accepted by most of the people, not merely by a cross section minority or by an elitist class' (36). Nigerian home video films are popular but face stiff criticism by film scholars at international levels for poor content and technical quality, for using themes of witchcraft and rituals. These videos are also considered as naïve and lacking in political, cultural, social, aesthetic and ideological import. Okoye observes that:

In practically every Nigerian city, in the suburbs as well as the rural areas, the genre has inscribed itself into the very rhythm of daily living. It has captured an audience who have found in it an empathic narrative of its challenging experience and dreams in the peculiar vicissitudes of contemporary postcolonial existence.

It is true that colonialism imposed on Nigeria its control of social production, wealth, dictatorship, mental domination and white supremacy which makes Nigerians perceive themselves with some inferiority complex. The traces of colonial

mentality are still very much noticeable in these movies.

### **The Nigerian video film and the national image**

Most nations of the world use film as a potent instrument for social and economic development. It is a powerful revenue spinner and an elixir in the economy of a nation. The industry is famous for its immense power to promote positive socio-cultural values and national ethos. The American Hollywood and Indian Bollywood film industries are excellent examples of the key roles of the film industry in modern development. The Nigerian Film industry represents a veritable cultural platform for registering Africa's authentic and original contributions to the cultural geography of a globalized world. Culture is expressed in different ways and one of the richest treasure chests of culture is art. Nigerian home video films are more than just films because they express a rich variety of cultural values, traditions and history. According to Akinrinade,

Home video films produced in Nigeria not only circulate in the country but also in neighbouring states including Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Togo. They are very popular in East, Central and South Africa. Some of the movie marketing organizations like Corporate Pictures and Zentury Pictures have sales outlets in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The Nigerian film industry therefore symbolizes the new wave of African cinema which has unleashed on the rest of the continent a whole content, putting back power into the hands of the African filmmaker who according to Victor Okahi has taught the rest of Africa that the man with the world processor and the man with the pencil are both writers and that if you can tell a compelling enough story with your pencil, people will ultimately reckon with you. The Nigerian home video film has caused a paradigm shift from the perception of Africa and Nigeria in particular as a derelict jungle, with monkeys and malnourished children, to a destination both for tourism and business. These praises and criticisms notwithstanding, the Nigerian home video

narratives have clearly become a dominant force as a regional African world acclaimed provider of cultural content. As one of the most powerful media for fostering cultural awareness with the most overwhelming appeal and impact, the film industry is a very potent product of the culture industry. In an exclusive interview on the repositioning of the Nigerian movie industry for national development, Igbo states that:

The motion picture is the most important of all arts and that what people know today about other countries and places are invariably learnt via films. The late entry of Nigerians into the film industry has recorded tremendous success; however, the absence of a vigorous government policy has left the development of the industry for a long time in the hands of foreign business interests. Consequently, the film industry in Nigeria developed as one of the most fertile grounds for the propagation of foreign values, tastes, cultures and world outlook.

There is no other means of propaganda that has conveyed the value, character and promises of Nigeria in the global brand view. It is a truism that Nigerian movies depict some aspects of culture and national life which reinforce the negative stereotype as contained in western films. This is a clear indication that Nigerian film practitioners are yet to take their civic social responsibility seriously. Their films could be used to correct the misconceptions and show how African scientists are today world class, and how Nigerians in particular have proved their mettle in trade, industry, economics and the arts. Afolabi regrets that:

The African video film industry has a responsibility to portray these to the world, to eliminate pre-existent misconceptions about Africa. Unfortunately however, some African video films in their quality and most especially in their contents seem to confirm or authenticate the biased, euro-centric and jaundiced, views about Africa's primitivism.

Afolabi examines the movie, *The Battle of Musanga* (1996) as a literary confirmation of the jaundiced

euro-centric views and European hegemonic myths about the underdevelopment of Africans (8-20). The film portrays the African as underdeveloped, wild, and beastly. The common occurrence of activities of witch doctors, blood-sucking witches and wizards in *Rituals* (1997) by Andy Amenechi, *Blood Money* (1997) by Chiko Ejio, *Time* (2000) by Ifeanyi Onyeabor, *Witches* (1999) by Fred Amata, *Magic Money* (1999) by Teco Benson and several others portray the African culture in a very negative way. Such portrayals of triumph of evil which dominate these video movies are promoting a culture of fear, helplessness and uncertainty in the viewing audience. Citing an example from a visiting American scholar who had watched such movies preparatory to her visit to Nigeria, Afolabi summarizes her confession at the end of her visit in the following manner:

She had expected to encounter witches and witchdoctors at every corner of the streets, but that contrary to this, she did not have the opportunity of seeing one or see a display of their powers, throughout her six months stay in Nigeria.

Shaka captures Osofisan's vexations about Nollywood negative narratives thus:

I will not, as you know, be the first to make this complaint. Even our friends outside have voiced the same unease about the ambiguity of Nollywood. The common question that people ask, as you know, is – why this unceasing preoccupation with juju, this relentless celebration of dark rituals and diabolical cults? Practically every Nollywood director seems to have been caught in the spell – mix a diet of grotesque murders and cacophonous chants and bizarre incantations, and smile all the way to the bank!.

As a cultural ambassador, the film medium is a carrier of culture. It helps in its propagation by impacting and exporting cultures as it transports viewers to different parts of the world. The Nigerian film industry Nollywood is very important to the nation not only because it creates employment and generates income but also because it is a cultural



tool that should showcase the nation's exotic culture across the globe.

### Conclusion

Most nations of the world, like the United States of America, India, United Kingdom, China, Germany and several others use their film industries as potent instruments to promote positive socio-cultural values and national ethos. The lack of intellectual content that would stimulate discourse about the Nigerian situation deprives a large segment of the indigenous population of the opportunity to actively indulge in Nollywood entertainment. The negative narratives only debase the Nigerian culture as they portray the country in bad light to the outside world. While the onus is on the film practitioners to exercise their freedom of expression, poetic license, the liberty of choice of materials; they are also saddled with the responsibility of not confusing or misleading the people with falsehood. All nations of the world have societal ills ranging from poverty, organized crime, ghettos, rape, robbery, banditry and many others which are hardly treated as subject matters in their films. This implies that every nation has some form of skeletons or the other in its cupboard under lock and key away from the prying eyes of foreigners. Nigerian film practitioners should therefore not blow up the sizes of their skeletons in the name of culture. Nigeria is a society where evil and good contend like in any other place but, in the end, the good triumphs over evil. These movies should tell stories about people who love their families, our heritage, hospitality and warmth to visitors, a country with lush vegetation, a diversified rich culture and much more. The above scenario can only be actualized and sustained for national interest if Nigerian film practitioners give the stories a positive treatment in their script. The steps towards effective use of film as a tool for cultural promotion would obviously be a deliberate effort to re-educate the filmmakers about their social responsibility and the need to see their film products as treasures with far reaching positive results for socio-cultural and economic development.

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