

The Historical Analyses of the Evolution and Socio-cultural influences in Nollywood

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Abstract

*The evolutionary account of Nollywood engenders heated controversies amongst scholars. Most scholars of the Western region of Nigeria believe that Nollywood started and still articulates western culture in its filmic practices. On the other hand, the scholars in the Eastern region of Nigeria believe that Nollywood started and maintains Eastern cultural ideology in its filmic practice. This paper in examining both arguments embarks on a textual analysis of *Living in Bondage*, a video film which is professed by most scholars in these two regions to have christened the inception of Nollywood. The paper thus affirms that English version of Nollywood still maintains the cultural ideology of the Eastern Nigeria in its filmic practices.*

Introduction

Entertainment is part of human existence. Since the inception of life, man has sought entertainments in several ways. Thus entertainment is tied to the culture of the people. In pre-colonial period, Africans entertained themselves in different ways through different festivals which feature wrestling competitions, dances, masquerades and such other acts. These forms of entertainment are communal and were done in the village square or the king's palace. The digitization of the modern media has anchored the adaptation and domestication of these festivalacts in different ways.

The introduction of cinema to Nigeria for instance anchors on the tradition of communal entertainment. This study examines the history of Nollywood and different filmic practices in Nigeria and argues that Nollywood is supposedly the English adaptation of the Igbo filmic industry and as such situate Nollywood's dominant filmic culture to Igbo ethnic extraction of Nigeria. The paper notes that different ethnic group such as Yoruba, Hausa has a thriving language film culture which hitherto represents their cultural ideologies.

The Nigerian Movie Industry: A Historical Review

The history of video film in Nigeria is influenced by a number of factors. The birth of Nollywood leans on the activities of entrepreneurial film merchants, producers and the reaction of the motion picture audience in Nigeria over the years. The first film screened in Nigeria was in August 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall Lagos. The exhibition which was led by a Spanish firm, Balba and company was orchestrated by Herbert Macaulay (Ohiri, 53). Shaka affirms that these Spanish and English merchants exhibited their films regularly to fee-paying audience at Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos (11). Though these films were silent films and had no audio, it was sustained for a good number of years and the commercial exhibitors used it effectively to launder the image of the American government against Germany. Citing Balogun, Ohiri notes that, "the objective of bringing in films includes to convince colonies, and to show the outside world the excellent work being done in heathen parts under the aegis of Union Jack" (54). The colonial government's involvement in film production began in 1929 as a result of an epidemic outbreak within the Lagos protectorate. William Sellers initiated the production of the film which showed that rats were responsible and the carrier of the disease. William Sellers, a chief health officer of the Federal Department of health then also used film to show the efforts of the cooperation in eliminating the plague. The success and impact of the film led to the adoption of film

as an instructional material by the colonial government (Shaka, 11-12). The colonial instructional films continued from 1929 to 1946.

However, some Nigerians such as Adamu Halilu, A.A Fajemisin, J.A Otigba and Mallam Yakubu Aina were sent for training in a film training school in Accra, Ghana. On arrival to Nigeria after their training, they resorted to the production of documentary films. Some other Nigerians who studied film production in Europe and North America such as Ola Balogun, Eddy Ugbomah, Francis Oladele, Sanya Dosumu, Jab Adu equally returned to the country and started feature film production in the mid 1970s (Shaka, 12). Adesanya accounts that it was the quest to produce feature film that is devoid of colonial cultural domination that gave rise to the indigenous feature film productions (73). *Kongi's Harvest*, the first Nigerian film was produced in 1970 by Calpenny Nigeria Ltd, directed by an African-American, Ossie Davies. *Kongi's Harvest* generated a lot of debate amongst scholars on its qualification as the first Nigerian feature film. Some scholars argued that though originally a play scripted by Wole Soyinka, the director's identity and country of origin must have affected the Nigerian factor in the film. The same criticism was raised in *Son of Africa* (1971) and *Golden Women* (1971) which were sponsored by a Lebanese production company. However, in 1975, *Amadi*, an Igbo film was produced by Afro Cult Foundation Limited and directed by Ola Balogun (Shaka, 12-13; Ohiri, 54-55). Many scholars consider *Amadi* as the first Nigerian feature film not because it was shot in indigenous language but because the director Ola Balogun is a Nigerian. This is because the director's nationality is a strong determinant factor of film's nationality amongst other factors such as sponsorship, themes, crew and cast which equally determines film's nationality.

Meanwhile, before these experimentations in feature film by indigenous directors, theatrical traditions and movements were already very strong in the West of Nigeria with its peculiar production and star systems. Feature film productions leaned on these existing theatrical structures. Haynes and Okome posit that they were the strongest element

in the twenty-year span of Nigerian film production (21). Ola Balogun being instrumental to the smooth transition of Yoruba stage productions directed the following films; *Jaiyesimi* (1979) *Aye* (1979) *Aropin N'tenia* (1982) and *Ayanmo*, all of which were Herbert Ogunde's stage productions. For Adeyemi Folayan (Ade love films) he directed *Ija Ominira* (1982) and *Kadara/Destiny* (1982). He equally directed *Orun Mooru* and *Mosebolatan* (1984/85) for Moses Olaiya (Shaka, 2002, p. 13). Films produced at this period were very stagy as the camera served only as recordable equipment without camera narrative voice. Ime Usen explains that this stagy narrative characteristic of Nigerian video film vividly. However this stagy characteristics has been well explicated in the works of some film scholars such as Hyginus Ekwuazi's *Film in Nigeria*, Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome's "Evolving Popular Media; Nigeria Video Films" and Femi Shaka's "History, Genres and Text of the Emergent Video Film Industry in Nigeria". Citing Haynes, Usen affirms that most Nigerian filmmakers come from the theatre belt of the country which is the southwest. Theatre practitioners having attained fame in theatre practice make use of theatrical techniques in film production (12). Static camera positions which characterized these productions buttress this fact.

Stagy narrative techniques in film productions with *cine* camera continued till 1985 when Ibrahim Babangida's introduced Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). This programme affected filmmaking in Nigeria. The devaluation of the naira which was occasioned by SAP made the production cost of films high to be accommodated by the producers (Shaka, 14). Shaka's article, "Rethinking the Nigerian Video Film Industry; Technological Fascination and the Domestication Game," offers a lucid understanding of the film to video film transition process. He affirms that the use of the video camera to produce film was occasioned by the fascination with the new modern technology (video camera) and its creative application to solving problems (.41). According to him, before video film production, video cameras were used by wealthy men in the

society to record and document special occasions. He asserts that the term video camera entered the vocabulary of Nigeria in the 1970s. This was enabled by the activities of Igbo electronics merchants and importers who ply Asian routes for business. Sharing the same view with Haynes, he affirmed that the introduction of the equipment for video film production was orchestrated by Babangida's government Structural Adjustment Programme (S.A.P) (Shaka, 44). Shaka recalls that these cameras were earlier used to replicate life without emphasis on the narrative voice of the camera. These documentary activities by videographers helped the film-to-video transition process. This is because, it not only provided the trained personnel, but also popularized video home system (VHS), its playback medium which would later serve as a medium for watching these video films (44). Most of the operators of these video cameras worked in state television stations and other audiovisual public companies. Citing Olaoye, Haynes and Okome confirm that the retrenched technicians from state television stations through SAP initiative also provided the needed labour for film-to-video transitional process (Haynes & Okome, 25).

By the late 1980s, there were simultaneous experimental video film productions in both the western and southern parts of Nigeria. Citing Uge, Shaka affirms that between 1987 and 1988, an Igbo producer known as Solomon Eze, who adopted the screen name of Mike Orihedinma began to emerge. His stories which were in series were produced, directed and acted by Mike himself. He produced such titles as *Ochoifeukwu*, *Adaeze*, the *Ola Nma Series*, the *Onyemechi Series* and the *Ihe Ne Eme Nna series* (15). On a similar note, Haynes and Okome cited Ayorinde and Okafor to have opined that Yoruba travelling theatre artists began video film production in 1988 because of its cheap production cost within the economic constrain as at then (Haynes & Okome, 23). However, the Igbo business men understood video film production business very well and opened way for retail sale of video cassettes. Kenneth Nnebue, an Igbo electronics dealer was said to have raked hundreds of thousands in the production of *Aje Ni*

Iya Mi, a Yoruba video film which he produced for the late Sola Oguniola with production cost which was not up to N2,000. Seeing the money made and unhappy with the pittance being paid, Yoruba artists like Jide Kosoko, Adebayo Salami, Gbenga Adewusi and Muyi Aromire, soon rented a U-matic video camera and started their own productions (Haynes & Okome, 1997, p.24). Some television drama series were also shot on video camera during this period. Prominent amongst them were *Jagua*, *Hot Cash*, popularly known as *Willy-willy*, *Zebrudaya*, etc. To firmly establish film in Nigeria, the Federal Government of Nigeria enhanced the articulation of the Film Policy for Nigeria and a Film Institute was established in Jos (Ohiri, 57).

An epoch was made in 1992 in particular with the production of the video film *Living in Bondage* by Kenneth Nnebue's Company, Nek Video Links and directed by Vic Mordi. Most scholars agree that the commercial success of this video film firmly established the video film industry in Nigeria and attracted a deluge of video camera producers. After *Living in Bondage*, another Igbo video film, *Circle of Doom I & II* (Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, 1993) was also shot in the desire to reach a wider audience, Kenneth Nnebue released an English video film, *Glamour Girls I & II* (1994). Other films such as *Taboo I & II*, *Jezebel I & II*, *Evil Passion* and *Nneka The Pretty Serpent I & II* emerged (Shaka, 137). The commercial success of these video films gave rise to genre related productions. "First it was rituals, followed by epics. The ritual videos attracted a lot of public outcry These were followed by Christian evangelical video films" (Shaka, 18). Many more video film genres had since emerged from the industry. Adesanya asserts that the quest by desperate producers to remain in motion picture business and the quest for professionalism and aesthetics increased video film budget from N50,000 to millions of naira (16-17). However, the industry has attracted a lot of criticism. Many scholars observe that its greatest problem is its poor production and narrative techniques. Others attribute it to its poor marketing structure. Nevertheless, many blockbusters have emerged in the industry. OJ

Production's *Igodo* (1999) directed by Andy Amenechi was widely received as *Osuofia in London* (2003) directed and produced by Kingsley Ogoro also popularized the Nollywood industry in the international sphere.

Adesanya's article "From Film to Video," which featured in Haynes and Okome's edited *Nigerian Video Films*, provides a historical knowledge of the transition from celluloid film to video film. Though he mentions poor narrative structure as one of the problems in Nollywood, he identifies poor marketing structure as the major problem in the video film industry. He affirms that video production started on a desperate desire by producers to remain in the motion picture business in the face of economic distress of SAP (13-20).

Nollywood: A new wave of African Cinema

Ukadike traces the history of African cinema, drawing a sharp contrast between African cinema and Nollywood film culture which could be termed a new wave of African cinema. To Ukadike, the forerunners of African cinema took a strong didactic stance in propelling African ideology against Western imperialism. This is to ensure the renaissance of the lost African voice which was stifled by foreign film producers. To reclaim African voice, the forerunners of African cinema thus privileged the didactic component over the entertainment components of the cinema. It should be noted that entertainment is the bedrock of Nollywood productions. Ukadike notes that though African cinema films were not commercial successes, they helped to reclaim true African identity from the negative stereotype being portrayed by Western producers (177-178). Furthermore, he draws a line between the two filmmaking cultures noting that the prolific nature of the video-camera technique in Nollywood productions against the celluloid-camera technique in the African cinema of the 60s and 70s has ranked Nollywood amongst the much older film production circuits such as Hollywood and Bollywood. Furthermore, Ukadike observed that language in both cultures has tremendous

consequence in their commercial value. While English language adopted by Nollywood video films exposes it to the international shelves, the restricted nature of dialectic languages in African cinema kept it away from international shelves. In addition, Ukadike notes that Nollywood film unlike the core African cinema of the 60s and 70s is driven by beautiful stories, but lacks the technical proficiency of the 35/16mm which is the fascination of the African cinema of the 60s and 70s (184). While this paper agrees with Ukadike's notion of technical paucity in most Nollywood productions which could be ascribed to the hasty production techniques of most producers, his notion of 35/16mm camera needs a serious rethink. However, this researcher argues that the digital technology has adapted the 35/16 mm lenses to the modern cameras that are mostly used in Nollywood. It is rather the application of this new technology that is the bane of most of Nollywood shabby productions. Nevertheless, most recent Nollywood films are technically acclaimed successes. Films such as the *Figurine* (Kunle Afalonyan, 2010), *Ije* (Chineze Anyaene, 2012), *Amazing Grace* (Jeta Amata, 2001), *Two Brides and A Baby* (Teco Benson, 2011), *Mr. & Mrs.* (Ikechukwu Onyeka 2010) to mention a few, justifies this claim.

Film structure in Nigeria has passed through several phases that reflect the tempo of the country's political economy. The production structure of Nollywood, from its landmark inception in 1992 to the present, is best described as entrepreneurial in Nature. *Living in Bondage* was produced by Nek Video Links, a production company owned by Kenneth Nnebue. Similarly, most films are produced by independent producers in Nigeria. These productions have been actualized with little or no governments' assistance. Before the production of *Living in Bondage* by Nek Video Links, private film production companies were earlier floated in the 1970s to produce feature films. Some of the production houses were established in conjunction with foreign production houses. Shaka recalls that the first of such private film production company established in Nigeria was Calpenney Nigerian Film Ltd, established in

1965. It should also be recalled that Nigerian trained movie producers who came back from abroad like Ola Balogun, Eddy Ugbomah, Adamu Halilu floated their production companies. Balogun and Ugbomah's films were produced solely by their companies, Afrocult foundation and Eddy Fosa films respectively. Adamu Halilu's films were mostly produced by his production company, Hanks in partnership with Sokoto State Government (292-297). Apart from the companies run by Balogun, Ugbomah and Halilu, production houses were formed and run professionally by theatre artistes like Hurbert Ogunde and Adebayo Salami who embraced the emergent film culture, and equally produced films with their production houses. The paper observes that the capitalist nature of Nollywood must have apparently marginalized the first generation filmmakers from running profitable production companies. A crop of film merchants who control the Alaba, Onitsha, and Aba film markets have thus used their stores as production houses and by their practice, they perceive film not as an art but a mere commercial commodity. As a result, some first generation production houses that were formed by the likes of Eddy Ugbomah apparently could not stand the test of time, though their films had national appeal. This paper argues that this crop of first generation filmmakers could not succeed because they had biases of film as an art and its didactic import rather than film as a commodity as well as its commercialism which sustains the industry presently. The forerunners of film in Nigeria had the influences of African cinema which Ukadike's attests echoes the African voice in the face of imperialism. However, the fact that production is not complete till it gets to the final consumers undoubtedly underscores the success of Onitsha, Aba and Alaba production structures over the forerunners of film in Nigeria.

As earlier noted, this entrepreneurial structure inevitably discourages intellectuals and corporate organizations from investing in the industry as there are no formal structure of recouping one's investment. However, the paper draws attention to a reinvention of

cinema culture in Nollywood. Thus this has given room for corporate bodies to identify with film Nollywood film production. The Jeta Amata's production of *Amazing Grace* which was sponsored by Donald Duke, the then governor of Cross Rivers state justifies this claim. Some other corporate bodies such as Amstel Malta Nig PLC also sponsor films in Nollywood. Besides corporate sponsorship, films produced on entrepreneurial basis are mostly shot with digital video cameras, edited on computer and replicated on V.C.Ds for the teeming viewers.

The Socio-Cultural Influences of Eastern Nigerian Culture and Festival Theatre in the Evolution and Practice of Nollywood

In an article, "Impact of missionary film production and Yoruba travelling theatre on the evolution of the Nigeria video film industry" Azeez gives an account of the evolution of Nollywood. Citing Okome, he notes that the term Nollywood was coined by Nick Moran following the vocabulary of the dominant cinemas such as Hollywood and Bollywood. He notes that there are three important evolutionary factors in the development of Nigerian video film industry. According to him these are the colonial missionary film production and screening, Hollywood/foreign exhibition and Yoruba travelling theatre. He adds that of all these factors, the Yoruba travelling theatre probably has a dominant influence in the evolution as well as the practice of Nollywood (130-143). His assertion of the influence of Yoruba popular travelling theatre on Nollywood calls for a rethink. First, Azeez was seeming privileged Yoruba travelling theatre in his evolutionary account of the film industry in Nigeria failing to observe that while Yoruba theatre companies were thriving in Western Nigeria, Igbo traditional theatre/festivals were also thriving concurrently in the Eastern Nigeria. Thus most of these Igbo traditional theatre festivals were documented in VHS tapes and these aroused people's interest in video film production.

The theatrical import of Igbo traditional festival has been a heated argument in the academia in the 1980s. The Enekwe and Echeruo

controversy on this issue published in *Nigerian Drama and Theatre: A critical source book* edited by Ogunbeyi comes to fore. Enekwe had argued that Igbo traditional festivals are loaded with theatrical elements and as such regarded as pure African theatre. This argument has so far rekindled interest in the study of theatrical elements in different cultural festivals. In a lucid study of *Okorosha Ubomiri* masquerade performance, Canice Nwosu cites Onuora Nzekwu's assertion that there is a myth behind every masquerade performance, a short and very simple story which is usually dramatized (117). Adopting post modern theory in studying *Okorosha*, Nwosu asserts that there is a drastic improvement in the song, dance and mythopeotic language of the festival (185). He situates this festival as pure Igbo theatre. Based on theatrical elements in Igbo traditional festivals, this paper opines that if Nollywood is subjected to postmodernism, one readily discovers that the enhanced temperament of Igbo tradition constitutes major influences in its narrative technique.

Before the production of *Living in Bondage*, Mike Orihedimma has produced several episodes of his video films. These episodes which reflect the imprints of Igbo traditional theatre/festivals continue to dominate the English version of Nollywood video films today. The ritual themes in Nollywood captures the Igbo's theatrical preoccupation such as *Afia Olu* festival in Nnewi Anambra State which is woven on poetic justice where righteousness triumphs over evil. Such Igbo festival theatres models Nollywood productions. Andy, a character in *Living in Bondage* having gone astray in quest for wealth suffers hallucinating experiences which results in his repentance and rejection of evil. It should be stressed therefore that *Living in Bondage* which Azeez and most scholars agree christened Nollywood was influenced tremendously by Igbo traditional theatre. The traditional Igbo dances at Andy's chieftaincy coronation as well as his traditional marriage lend credence to this assertion. The major theme of this work which is rituals equally captures Igbo traditional theatre culture. It is wrong therefore to argue that Yoruba traditional theatre culture is dominant in Nollywood English films. Though there are

traces of such, such propositions are apt in the Yoruba language Nollywood films. Thus Nollywood reflects Igbo theatre culture and tradition more than any other ethnic theatre.

Mgbemere observes that of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria which comprises Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, Igbo ethnicity seems to be lacking in producing contents in its local language. Citing UNESC 2006 statistical report on Nigerian film production in the global sphere as well as the ethnic production ratio in language films, he notes that:

About 56% of Nollywood films are produced in Nigeria's local language, namely Yoruba (31%), Hausa (24%) and Igbo (1%). English remains a prominent language, accounting for 44% which may contribute to Nigeria's success in exporting its films(213).

Notably, the UNESCO statistics as cited by Mgbemere conducted in 2006 may be misleading in the Nollywood language film production statistics presently. Previously, it was Yoruba and Hausa language film contents that were established in Multi choice digital satellite TV. Presently, there is a Nollywood Igbo channel which is arguably stuffed with Igbo contents.

However, Mgbemere argues strongly that the 44% percent of the English language films are controlled by Igbo filmmakers who have earlier transposed all their thought, cultures values and language to the production of English film shortly after *Living in Bondage* was released. Nevertheless, reacting to the survey by UNESCO, Mgbemere argues that the 44 percent English and the 1 percent Igbo implies that the Igbo film accounts for 45% of the total films produced in the country (2017, p.214).

First, it is important to reaffirm that Igbo film and Nollywood are one and the same thing; the language of expressions notwithstanding (209)

This argument is on the premise that Igbo filmmakers are the key players in the production of English films. He observes that Igbo, the progenitors

of Nollywood vied towards the production of English films due to their hospitable and entrepreneurial nature shortly after *Living in Bondage* was produced in Igbo language in 1992.

Having underscored that most ethnic groups in Nigeria have evolved their film cultures which is produced in their native languages which are better described as language films, it is instructive to note that the Igbo ethnic extractions which has just evolved a viable language film culture still pilots the affairs of the English version of Nollywood. Arguably if the English version of Nollywood films are subjected to ethnographic criticism, one will surely find out that about seventy percent or more explicate Igbo festival and theatrical traditions. For the purpose of clarity an ethnographic film is regarded as any film which seeks to reveal a society. All films are ethnographic in some measure as film cannot entirely evade the culture which produces it (MacDougall, 136). Thus the influence of Igbo festival theatre has continued to be a dominant motif in Nollywood till date. After the production of *Living in Bondage*, *Taboo* which also came from the staple of Kenneth Nnebue is replete with the tradition of Igbo festival theatre. Thereafter, many more films equally have these Igbo traditions. History shows that it is the activities of Igbo electronic dealers in Onitsha, Aba and Alaba that firmly established Nollywood. Thus these executive producers naturally take to their culture.

Conclusion

This paper has established that there are different ethnic film practices in Nigeria popularly known as language films. Most of them have adopted different nomenclatures. Nigerian English film generally regarded as Nollywood are produced in English language. However, because of the indifferent attitude of Igbos to their indigenous language and the quest to reach wider viewers, Igbo producers take to English language films. These English films which replicate the Igbo culture influences Nollywood tremendously. Thus, Nollywood films project Igbo culture more than any other ethnic group in Nigeria.

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