

CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION: NIGERIAN WOMEN IN FILMS

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multi-cultural society, but the visual image of women can be said to be the same among these various cultures. In Africa, women are not seen as they are in the Western world. Globalisation has however brought the modern Nigerian woman closer to Western ideologies and exposed her to a new perception of gender and gender role and image. While Nollywood films still battle to find a balance between representing the Nigerian woman in the cultural image and the Westernized Nigerian, people's mentality has yet accepted the full impact of these intercultural interactions. Using some Nollywood films as primary data, I intend to examine the image representation of the traditional and Western Nigerian in Nollywood. This paper intends to find out to what extent intercultural interactions can "transform" the Nigerian woman and still leave her "acceptable" in the light of the cultures and traditions. Is rewarding the cultural minded Nigerian, as highlighted in Nollywood films, a way of advising the women to stick to the traditional values? If so, what is the essence of intercultural interactions, which cannot be prevented, and which the modern Nigerian man loves to see in a modern Nigerian woman? Data would be polled from respondents over the Internet. This paper intends to address these and also proffer a solution to the dilemma, cultural representations and intercultural interaction, as seen in Nollywood films, is creating for the Nigerian woman and among the members of the society in general.

Introduction

Apart from being the adult of the female gender, African woman is a beautiful, powerful, resilient female of African descent with skin kissed by the sun. She is a 'gift to the society, an ethical being who confers some status on a man, one who is an upholder of morality' (Agbasiere 8). The true image of the African woman has been disfigured and misrepresented since the arrival of Feminism and Feminists in Africa. The theory is not a disaster, but the misinterpretation it gets has contributed to the distorted impression and portrayal of the Africanness in the African woman. Although its arguments are valid, Feminism has given womanhood a recent turn that is almost metamorphosing into a monstrous disaster, the original intent or traditional understanding of the African woman. In the established, customary understanding, a woman is the helper of a man, one to be provided for and loved, but submissive to the dictates of the man over her; who could be her husband, father or guardian. She is a symbol of the family, the jewel of her home and a crown on the man who marries her. Her characteristics, among others are purity, gentleness, diligence, submissiveness, long suffering, and family-mindedness. In the western or non-traditional African understanding, an understanding which feminism promotes, a woman is the equal opposite of a man who has as much rights as the man and can dictate over him when and where necessary.

This study does not aim at identifying the position a woman occupies or should occupy within the traditional African society, although it draws support from the exemplary lives and relationships of couples who lived and related in the pure African style. The essence of the study is to bring to light the damage which the representation women get in Nollywood films can cause in the society given that what is presented in the

films is very different from the real life situations. In other words, the realities of life in modern Nigerian society are, often times, not adequately portrayed in the home videos which are an art form that defines who we are to the international audience. And most importantly, the portrayal women receive in most of these videos, does not paint a nice image of what Nigerian women truly are or wish to be seen as. In a study carried out by Ukata, she observed that, 'the representations of women in Nollywood videos fail to depict them in ways which evaluate the sordid reality of things in the real world' (2010:1). Consequently, apart from feeding the Nigerian woman with wrong ideas of who she truly is and what society thinks she is, there is the danger of misrepresenting the Nigerian woman to the international communities. This brings about a deliberate artistic falsehood in intercultural interaction; a pretence in the course of mingling of different cultures during which each culture rubs off on the other, dropping or adding value to itself or the other. Intercultural interaction is a cultural communication between cultures during which characteristic information is passed from one culture to the other. A scrutiny of the woman image as portrayed in Nollywood films is both timely and crucial because the predominant image of the woman portrayed in most Nollywood films is one that has elements of western culture woven rather roughly into the Nigerian culture. This creates an image which is neither a true picture of the Westernized Nigerian nor of the traditional Nigerian. Hence, false information is passed to non Nigerians and even Nigerians who are not aware of the traditionally acceptable image and conduct of the true Nigerian woman.

In literary text, image is seen as a word or phrases that appeal directly to the reader's senses. It could also mean a physical or tangible representation of the external form of a

person or thing or an impression of such. In film, it is the picture or a visual representation or audio rendition that appeals directly to the readers' taste, touch, sense of hearing, smell or sight; hence it is not limited to the sense of sight. It is a vivid mental picture that evokes in the viewer, a peculiar sensation which is strong enough to be either detestable or desirable. Image is a vivid reproduction or representation of the form of a person or object; one that closely resembles it. It is the character or stylistic representation of the object as projected to the public, especially as interpreted by the media. This final definition describes image exactly in the context in which it is used in the article.

The image portrayed of Nigerian woman in most Nollywood films is not only distorted and false, but very disturbing because people who are unfamiliar with the true image of the Nigerian woman would accept that as both customary and factual. Onyekaba observes that, 'if you go to Zimbabwe, you will find people dressing like Nigerian film stars'. This explains that the viewers attach great importance to the image presented to them by these videos. If they would want to dress like these stars, they could equally try to speak and behave like them. Thus, a fallacious model is thereby created and sold to the audience, home and abroad, as the image of the Nigerian woman in films.

Film is an important art form, a source of popular entertainment and a powerful method for educating or indoctrinating the citizens. It is a cultural artifact created by specific cultures and which in turn, affects them. Film is a form of communication; it is a universal language. The language of film can be understood with or without sound. In contemporary world, the availability of internet facilities makes films from different parts of the world available everywhere. Hence,

Nollywood films are available to audience members everywhere in the world in different formats. In Nigeria today, due to security issues, people tend to stay indoors with their families and watch home videos instead of going out to cinemas or theatres. Therefore, there is high exposure of the people, especially young ones to Nollywood videos.

Nollywood is the name or term coined to describe the Nigerian film industry, just as Bollywood describes the Indian film industry. Unlike Hollywood, Nollywood is not a geographical location in the country. With an output of close to one thousand films per annum, Nollywood is the second largest film industry in the world, after Bollywood, in terms of production size and output. Shot on digital video-cams, with a budget of about ten to forty thousand pounds per film, it takes a couple of days to make most Nollywood films. Due to piracy, filmmakers have the first two weeks to make profit from their DVDs before unauthorized copies infiltrate the market. These unauthorized copies are sold at cheaper prices and rented in video clubs at an even much lesser cost.

Nollywood films cover a diverse range of topics and issues in the society ranging from marriage and its attendant issues like procreation, relationships and infidelity, to religious matters, politics, romance etc. In a bid to reach a wider audience within Africa and the Diaspora, the themes have broadened and stretched very far, so that other cultures, foreign to Nigeria and Africa, are being incorporated into the films. These cultures may have been heard about, watched in foreign films, observed and/or imagined or acquired in the process of intercultural interaction. Once this culture becomes repeated and constant, which is always the case as filmmakers tend to have stock characters more often than not, it becomes acceptable as the way a people behave. It becomes their

culture, if not to them, then to outsiders who only watch them display such attitude. In recent times, Nollywood has collaborated with other film industries to make films. Women and the woman image has become so refined, to fit into the western understanding of woman and womanhood, that the women in these films, although Nigerians, are completely strange to an average Nigerian. However, this collaboration has its positive impact as the film standard, quality, production continues to get better and our culture continues to be enriched. Culture is the total way of life of a people which includes their art and other demonstrative evidence of their intellectual accomplishments which are regarded collectively and, overtime, come to be used to describe them. This (way of life) is reflective in their art and hence, it is typical to say that the films made by Nollywood are reflective of the culture, the way of life of the people of Nigeria. Owing to the interactions with other foreign cultures, the recent collaborations with other movie industries and the bid to break into the international market and reach a wider audience target, Nollywood films, excluding most of those categorized under traditional or epic films, manifest traits of unhealthy intercultural interactions which do not, most often than not, do justice to the image representation of the African woman in general and the Nigerian woman in particular.

Africans tend to appreciate women the same way, except where cultural and religious practices are concerned. In Nigeria, although there are several ethnic groups, all Nigerian women are expected to conduct themselves almost in the same manner; submissive to their husbands, be family minded, hospitable and respectful to all including her in laws. The only differentiating factors between the women from the different tribes and ethnic groups are in the dressing, religion and

language. An ideal Nigeria woman is conceived as a hard working, patient, long-suffering home-maker whose primary duty is to be wife and mother. She is a role model, a jewel to her family, crown on her husband and a rare gem to her society. She is much more occupied with domestic issues than social, political or religious positions. She is prudent, respectful and always decent in appearance and attitude. It does happen that not all women fit into this description, but such a woman as has these characteristics is seen as the true Nigerian woman.

Even though the Nigerian society has a general expectation as regards the behaviour and conduct of the woman, it would be easier to describe her from the point of view of a given tribe in the country. Among the Igbo people, a woman is seen as a role model and

in behaviour, she is supposed to be very calm, respectful to all her elders and adhere to all instructions from her parents, even as an adult. Until recently, a lady still lives in her parents' home until she is formally married

every Nigerian woman is expected to get married once she reaches the right age. In most tribes, marriage starts with the eldest daughter. She is not supposed to start living with the man until he has performed all the marriage rites and, among the Christians, until they are formally wedded in the church. Every Nigerian woman is expected to remain a virgin or at least not have a child till married.

Among the Igbo tribe, it is a thing of dishonor on her parents, if a lady becomes pregnant before she is formally married to a man. She is therefore asked to be married to whoever is responsible. Marriage is held sacred; it rests on the woman to make peace in the home. That a marriage works or collapses rests solely on the woman. The Igbo society does not look

kindly on a failed marriage and a woman from a failed marriage finds it difficult to be remarried.

Socially, it's alright for a lady to be active. However, she must conduct herself with some maturity especially if she is single. Late nights are frowned at by parents, who must know about her relationships; she must be decently dressed at all times, no skimpy wears. In as much as she is free to have an age grade among whom she is very free, she must be an example to her younger ones and follow the good examples of older ones.

The description above paints the image the society ordinarily would accept of a woman. Nollywood videos and pathetically, even Nigerian music videos, however portrays the image of a woman who is neither Nigerian nor western both in behaviour and appearance because it tries to integrate one culture into the other. For instance, Nigerian society, both in culture and religion, frowns at nudity. However, current Nollywood videos sacrifice decency on the altar of costume. Actresses are dressed to appeal to the audience, in other words, used as sex objects, instead of being costumed to define the roles they are playing. Lamenting on the woman image in Nigerian music videos, Angela Odah observes:

what I find most worrisome is that in these scandalously vulgar videos, some beautiful, intelligent looking girls are rigorously dancing their hearts out virtually nude. While the male lead singer is fully clad in his designer clothing and accessories. Wait a minute, must dancers strip to their bare necessities to aid our appreciation of the lyrics of a song?

The same question goes for the home videos. Inappropriate costume for an actor is bad costuming. Bad costuming stems from poor character interpretation. If the makers of a film do not interpret the characters appropriately, their communication to an audience becomes ineffective. A film is not some sort of fashion show, but a means of communication. It describes an event, a people, a place and tells the audience more about what is being watched. Dressing, however, is only an aspect of the woman image which these videos are getting wrong.

Westernization has not only interfered with the traditional sense of dressing, language, habit and conducts of the people, it has brought so much divide, that modern Nigerian women can be said to be having an identity crises at the moment. They try not to be 'local', by striving to be the 'western' they never end up being. The trouble is with the lame and shallow interactions between these cultures. Some contemporary women strive to be western even when they have never in an actual sense had any form of interrelationship with the western culture or sat down to critically analyze it, but only relate with what they see in movies and on the television. Meanwhile, these are mere embellishments which help describe the actors' personalities to the audience. It is needless to emphasize that most of the images portrayed in these films and programmes do not correctly define the western culture. Hence the local languages are suffering; marriages are collapsing; cultures and traditions are disappearing and behaviour is becoming very unruly as a result of this move to be Western.

Cultural conflict

The picture presented of the western woman is very admirable and every Nigerian woman wants to be just that. This is not

because she gets to have more benefits, but because it appears that her male counterparts desire that in their ideal women just as portrayed in Nollywood films. Hence the struggle by the ladies to not just appear like the women portrayed in the films, but to outdo them in dressing, behaviours and relationships. In the film *Mrs Somebody*, Kaira, a successful woman of thirty three is caught between the demands of the society to get married and the difficulty of finding the right man at the time needed. She employs religious faith and a positive attitude, yet she is not able to attract the right man. Although the seriousness of the theme is trivialised by some comic scenes, Kaira suffers heart break several times because she tries to fit into the life she thought men would love. It did lure them, but does not keep them as they leave her worse than they met her. Offering a happy ending to a series of heart breaking episodes, Kaira eventually finds a man who adores her. In the film, *Relationship* (2011), which has several sequels (*Another Level, Next Level and Beautiful Colour*), women are portrayed as senseless, easy to manipulate, loose and materialistic. Johnson uses his material possession and romantic prowess to lure women who are close friends into his bed and ruin their friendships. The well behaved girls are presented as timid, too religious and incapable of adapting in a fast changing society. These films, although they highlight some of the developments and truths in and about the society, they also paint a bad image of the Nigerian woman, portraying her as a desperate call girl who would do anything to get a job, husband or material possession. If Nollywood films are taken as works of art and art is a diverse range of human activities and a product of such activities, reflecting the people's life, thought, behaviour and culture, can it then be said that the image portrayed in these films are a true reflection of the Nigerian woman? If

Nollywood films are taken to be what a Nollywood director has described it to be, 'stories about us told in a simple way', then we are left with the question, 'are Nigerian women what the films say they are?' Audience members are therefore left with the impression that what they are seeing in these films is a reproduction or representation of the Nigerian woman. Another concern this image portrayal raises is the damage it does to the young girls who watch these films. Over time, they will begin to believe that that is what the society is and that is how best to survive in it, especially with the looming, very troubling situation of generational gap which is threatening the Nigerian society.

While studying the image portrayed of the Nigerian woman, three key phases that affect both the males and females are noted.

The lust

It's very natural for the ordinary man to desire gorgeous, skimpily dressed women. These ladies appear not just attractive, but also stand out among other ladies. They tend to steal the show and take the shine off those who are not as 'gorgeously' dressed. The image they lust after and which Nollywood tends to flaunt is that of a woman filled with western artificialities, lacks adequate knowledge of traditional values and adopts a behaviour which is incompatible with traditional values (Agbasiere, 2000).

Because Nigeria is a society where there are more females than males and every female wants to associate with a male either as a wife or girlfriend, room is created for an unhealthy competition among the girls to be able to attract and keep the boys to themselves. The female viewers are thus tempted to shade their traditional values to fit into class. Thus,

while the males lust for such women with western touch and modifications, the females lust for the image shown in the home videos which they believe moves the males better than the traditional image which they are brought up to cut.

The need

Whatever the males and females are lusting for, the males have specific need which they seek to satisfy when they are ready to tie up the knots with a woman. A number of responses were polled in the course of this research from some Nigerians. The responses and reactions received from the male respondents confirm that inasmuch as the males are attracted by the sexy appearances of the girls and their behaviour which, more often than not, do not conform with traditional values, they look for something else when they are ready to settle down for marriage or very serious relationships that could eventually lead to marriage. The qualities they look out for mostly are those which are traditionally passed onto the girls by their mothers, and not those acquired from socialising with friends. A man wants to take a responsible woman back to his parents for a formal introduction. A responsible lady is defined as someone pious, decently dressed, has proper grooming, respectful, loyal and obedient.

The result

The discrepancy between what the men lust for as described in some Nollywood videos and what they eventually settle for in real life situations causes a lot of troubles for the ladies. This is because, the kind of personality the men lust after is, in so many ways, different from the personality they finally choose for very serious relationships and marriage. This is particularly disturbing or raises so much concern because the Nigerian

society is one in which marriage is highly valued and once a woman reaches a certain age, she is expected to settle down with some man.

The videos therefore, are not painting the real or true image of the society and hence, deceive the ladies who look at these as the true depiction of the happenings in the Nigerian society. It would be wrong to call such audience members unwise because, a video, beyond being a piece of entertainment, should also pass across relevant information. The videos under study, *Mrs Somebody* and *Relationship* (with all its sequels), are good examples. *Mrs Somebody* does not only re-echo the fact that every woman has to be married, but it goes on to insinuate that ladies need to compete, healthily or not, before they can win a man. Re-echoing this does no more than get the ladies desperate, making them identify with the actions of the ladies in the film and gives them ideas of the things they could do to attract men to themselves. Often times, they end up doing just what they see in these films.

Relationship, with its sequels portrays a horrible image of the Nigerian woman. Johnson, the wealthy philanderer, is cursed with an unquenchable lust and an insatiable hunger for sex, but the women are not. The story leaves the viewer with the notion that Nigerian women get laid very easily, no matter their physical prowess, educational standing, social status or comfort. Johnson is able to win any woman he wants and he plays 'smart' on them to the point that he could keep two women in his house, in different rooms and go from one to the other without their knowing. Apart from the unappealing picture painted of these women, the video does not only leave the sensible ladies unrewarded, but gives the viewer the idea that if they had accepted Johnson's proposal of a love-affair, their stories would have been 'different' and 'better'.

As stated earlier, film is a means of socialisation, it is an art form that reflects the way of life of the people who created it. It is a tool for mass education and mass communication. Constantly exposing young girls to this image the films portray of women, will overtime affect their thoughts and belief system. This will cause a chaos in the society because the true image of the Nigerian woman, her identity, character and ideals will be lost completely. When this happens, the men will do in real life, what they are shown to do in these films. A number of responses were polled from an online research carried out via a social network. In this research, Nigerian men were asked what they truly look out for in an ideal woman and if the character portrayed in these home videos defined the characters of the women they would love to marry. The responses were made open to both sexes and over thirty male respondents were recorded. Over 70% of the male respondents (both married and single) said they would love their women to strike a balance between the traditional culture and western culture, while noting the inability of these films to paint a true picture of what they (men) truly want in their women. The married women, 12 out of the 18 women who responded, think that Nigerian men love a woman with a 60% traditional culture and 40% western culture balance. Special interest was taken in the responses of married women. This is because they reflect the tastes of the men who are married or ready to get married. Agbasiere (2000) observed that 'men have, for a variety of reasons, found it difficult to adjust themselves to the idea of wives who so radically differ from their mothers'. As these Nollywood videos do not mention that men want a more traditional-culturally inclined woman to one with the western culture, they will continue to confuse the ladies who view the videos as beyond mere entertainment. It is needless to

emphasize that film as an art form does more than entertain, it socialises and educates.

Effects of Nollywood videos

Most Nollywood videos have failed to make women understand that every woman has her place in the society. This is not implying that African culture which promotes gender discrimination should be extolled in these videos because this creates chaos in the homes. The inaccurate portrayal of the 'ideal' Nigerian home has so soiled the relationships in many homes so that there are more marital issues currently than there used to be some years back. Many women fail to notice because they are more concerned with gender equality and gender roles and have become less worried about the representation women are given in the roles that have come to be culturally reserved for females. In Nigeria, there is no doubting that there are ideal feminine roles, among which and above all are that of the hardworking wife and that of the lady of the home (Agbasiere, 2000). We have to accept that 'just like it is believed that there are certain duties specifically designed for each sex and it would be wrong to preach or argue for an interchange of roles, it is also believed Nigerian women have their place, role, statue in the society and must not try to corrupt her cultural personality with western lifestyle' (Dangogo, 1985). While intercultural interactions are embraced and should not be discouraged, the Nigerian woman must not forget that she can never be more western than she can be traditional, at least, not within the Nigerian society. Among the problems the image portrayal of women has created in the society is the mistrust and suspicions that lurk in the minds of men and women, giving birth to lack of trust for and confidence in others. Other problems include, but not limited to:

Generational gap/conflict

Ladies do all they can to look or appear like movie stars by dressing like them, speaking like them, behaving like them and so on. In the same manner, re-emphasizing an earlier stated fact, people in other countries try to imitate Nigerians by watching Nollywood films. The irony is that the image portrayed in these films is not the true image or representation. While they try to be like the Nigerians, Nigerians are trying to be like the westerners in attitude, speech, appearance, etc. Thus there is no originality, instead all that is left is an irony of situation.

The time is phasing out when the younger generation used to sit and learn morals from the older generations. Young people of today stick to themselves and the older ones seem to have very little or no influence over them as before. Thus, there is an unhealthy generational gap growing and conflicts between the generations rise constantly.

Living in shadows

Currently, due to either the problem of identity crisis or lack of faith and trust in others, situations abound where ladies falsify their characters and behave like they ordinarily would not. This is as a result of what they see in these videos. There is a lot pretence and exaggerations so that in real life, young men and women find it hard to trust the attitudes and characters of one another. People pretend to be who and what they are not just to fit into a circle, get what they want, win friendship or stand out. People have gone from living their everyday lives as their real selves to living in a shadow which takes different personalities at will.

Marital insecurity

All of a sudden, Nigerian marriages which used to last till death

parts the couples, no longer has the strength to endure trials and hard times. As seen in videos, couples opt for divorces when the going gets too tough and do not bother to settle their difference and move on with their marriages. Just as seen in the videos, every newly married lady prepares on how to deal with the 'wicked mother-in-law', not bothering with making effort to win her over with good attitude and respect.

The newlywed ladies, because of generational gap and what they see in the movies, abandon their key roles as true Nigerian wives, wanting their husbands not just to share in these duties, but to do them in their place. The truth remains that the Nigerian man still dominates the home and no matter what feminists say or insist on, a Nigerian woman has her place and given duties in the family. Hard as this may sound to the present generation and to feminists, we need to understand that there is and will always be cultural differences. Therefore, some of the things obtainable in western culture may not necessarily work in our own culture. In a study on gender in Africa, Beoku-Betts (2005) observed that knowing our places in a family does not make the woman a servant to her husband. It is a popular belief among the Igbo people of Nigeria, that a man's best friend is that woman (among his wives) who is capable of making him do just as she wishes.

The constant reminder in Nollywood films that in-laws are wicked and will attack the newly wed woman gets her unnecessarily prepared for a fight that is or would not be there. When she gets a friendly in law, she unconsciously begins to suspect a hidden agenda and when she gets a bad one, she braces up for war. These films entice viewers into being very Western and enjoy the private lives that bring about individualism and eventually, divisions. While foreign viewers will perceive what they see as the exact representation or reproduction of the

Nigerian woman, Nigerian viewers tend to understand the image portrayed as the trendy woman and feel obligated to imitate her. A question arises; how accurate is the image represented and to what degree is that image culturally acceptable among the people to whom this new image is exposed?

Recommendations

It is understandable that Nollywood storytellers and directors are trying to infuse some western elements into the Nigerian culture to increase their audience strength. It is worth stating that this infusion or interaction is not healthily portrayed as it leaves the viewers confused and misdirects some of them and also gives the wrong impression of Nigerians to the outside world. As it is said, the way of life of a people is reflective in their art. I suggest therefore that the image representation of women in Nollywood films should be borne out of a healthier cultural interaction between the Nigerian and foreign cultures. Also, the true situations should be shown to the public. The videos should be seen as more art than entertainment because that is what it is to the people. Art is first life before entertainment. While it engages them, it reforms their thoughts, habits and way of life, especially the female gender.

Importantly, while feminists continue to insist that 'women have become increasingly marginalised' and seek avenues to understand 'the possibilities of their involvement in modern development' (Awe 2001), attention needs to be given to how women are portrayed in everyday life and activities as this invariably affects the image and responsibilities that could be given them. The fact that the Nigerian society could be asymmetrical, with cultural traditions that dictate what gender plays what role, should call attention to the representations or portrayal of how women carry out their primary assignments.

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