

**THRILLER THEORY AS A PANACEA FOR NATION  
BUILDING AND QUALITY PRODUCTION IN  
NOLLYWOOD FILMS: OBI'S *IDEMILI* SEASON 1 AS  
PARADIGM**

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***Abstract***

*Film is seen as an effective educational tool for correcting societal ills in the sense that it presents the people's cultures and raises critical questions on the norms and traditions obtainable in any society; therefore any attempt to misinterpret the intended message of this medium through sub standard production affects the existential essence of a people. This study presents the problems of filmmakers and film making process in Nigeria video film industry and points out how the divorce of theory from practice has affected professionalism in the industry. The study proposes a radical restructuring of the film industry in Nigeria in order to sustain what it has achieved for further development. To this end, it suggests a fusion of theory and practice in order to sustain growth and development that started in the industry over two decades ago. This will enable film makers in the industry to achieve a viable integration of the whole processes of film making to reach the pick of professionalism. This trend should serve as catalyst for flushing out quacks and amateurs who parade themselves as filmmakers in the industry. The researcher zeros in the study on a new Nigerian thriller Home video film: Idemili season 1 (2014) so as to explore the service of thriller theory to film making in the Nollywood*

*Industry. The aim is to ascertain how this theory could be used as mechanism for sustainability and growth in Nigeria Film Industry. Case study and content analysis research approaches of the qualitative research method are adopted for the realization of research objectives.*

## **Introduction**

There is no doubt that the Nigerian Video Film Industry accorded the name Nollywood has come of age in the last two decades, it has witnessed a lot of transformation in production, distribution and exhibition of its finished products. Essentially, Nigerian films/movies are finding their ways in the world film market, this is evident as more and more people are becoming interested in the Nigerian film industry and in the business of filmmaking. It is against this background therefore, that some film critics all over the world are picking interest in the Nigerian film industry and its products as subject matters of great concern. Although some critics believe that the producers or film makers in Nigerian are trying in producing films/movies that attract viewership and popularity in some part of the world. Ampe posits that, "The Nigerian movie industry is highly acclaimed and watched by millions of people all over the world. They see and enjoy it in theatres, halls, auditoriums, on television, in airplanes, ships, trains, at home, and several other places"(8). Following this opinion, the question to be answered is: of what quality and standard are these films made? Responding to this question, Mohammed Jamila, sadly notes that:

As more movies are made and the market grows wider and wider, the content deteriorates and it is now just a case for

what will sell. One would think that the producers would seize the opportunity to produce worthwhile, meaningful and beneficial movies. (116)

Ayakoroma trying to give answer to the above question which centred on the quality and standard of films produced in Nigeria, writes:

The implication here is that films industries in advanced economies like Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Canada, Italy, Japan, China, among others cannot compare to that which obtains presently in Nigeria...the video film industry has become highly engaging..Consequently, there is the need for stakeholders to factor in and produce standard (films (22).

This research work sets out to investigate the process through which the efforts of current film makers in the Nigeria film industry can be sustained through the marriage of theory and practice. The Nigeria film industry seems to accommodate all and sundry hence “The industry’s major source of funding comes from marketers, individuals, non-governmental organizations or corporations. The Nigerian government has not invested in the industry (Aje-Ori, 87). This position may explain the reason why social miscreants, and people rejected by other sectors of the Nigeria economy jump into the business of film making without caring about the practice or knowing the theory that propelled the trade they are into.

Had pioneers Nigerian film makers succeeded in their arts, the fusion of film theories and practice would have been realized

by now. In 1970s, the sudden collapse of Nigeria economy worsened the intended hopes of many film makers and cinema goers who were actually expecting to see Nigerians produce quality films other than showing American and Indian films in Nigeria cinemas. Ambrose notes that:

The momentous period of cine moviemaking in Nigeria spans the years between 1970 and 1989. When it was thought that the movie industry has established, political upheavals thwarted the efforts of the pioneers. It came close to being a vibrant industry in the only 1980s, but momentum was gathering the economy receded (27).

In the light of the above assertion by the late 1980's filming on celluloid had become too expensive and without much ado, film production shifted to video-film production. By the early 1990's Home video, movies started exploding with increasing viewer-ship. Prior to this, the Nigeria movie industry was almost extinct. Soap operas and made-for-TV movies dominated the nations television screen in the late 1980's to stay in the business of movie making, a few film producers turned to video, although they had limited fund, Nnebue's success in video production provided encouragement and determination in Home video production. Ebewo posits that:

With the global world united under the sway of visual culture, the emergence of the video films in Nigeria is timely and crucial as it serves as the voice of its people and responds to the drudgery of a socioeconomic existence characterized by high unemployment and dwindling opportunities (47).

From the above assertion, one can understand or picture the kind of “professionals”, and “movie makers we have today in the Nigeria film industry. Stakeholder in Nigeria film industry as well as academia (theorist) have a lot of work to do so as to enable the film producers, directors, actors, camera operators and others embark on the process of making quality films that will stand the taste of time. This is necessary as Nigerian film audience, critics, and media experts have started comparing Nigeria film industry with its America and Indian counterparts. Aje-Ori again notes that, “Nollywood movies differ from Hollywood movies largely in terms of production and distribution” (187). This new trend of comparison exposes a lot of loop holes that characterized some of the movies produced in Nigeria.

This study by the virtue of studying some of the Nollywood films looked at how theory and practice can be married together to give Nollywood Film Industry the class it deserves in the world film ranking. The artistry, professionalism and assiduousness are needed in Nollywood. There is a serious need to approach the Nigerian film industry from the professional perspective, allowing academia to come in with theories as one would have it done in other sectors of the nation’s economy. Nevertheless some individuals are making attempt to come up with something new from everyday Nigerian movies but theorising the tenets of film making in Nigerian film industry will be that first step that would make a thousand miles if harnessed properly.

### **Characteristics and identification of Thriller Materials in the selected Film**

Thriller theory could be said is a term peculiar to the Hollywood. Thriller genre creates high paced actions in films, for

instance, watching most of the Hollywood movies takes most audiences out of their everyday experiences and transports them to a different world that the Russian dramatist Maxim Gorky calls the “Kingdom of Shadows.” The audiences immerse themselves in the lives of imaginary characters and events; develop opinions about historical events.

The thriller film theory has achieved a greater height in Hollywood movies and if well-adopted in Nollywood would enhance professionalism in the industry. Watching American films embellished with thriller traditions glues viewer to his seat and at the same time challenges his imaginations. Take for example films like, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather*, Ian Flemming’s *James Bond* series, the military thrillers of *Cornelius Ryan*, David Cameron’s *Titanic* and so on. Any of these films can instigate fear of uncertainty in the audience while watching the movie due to its carefully carved structure that often highlights a villain-driven plot, whereby the villain presents obstacles, barriers, impediments huddles etc, which the hero must surmount at the end of the film. Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu outlines the characteristics of thriller genre as follows: “Suspense, tension, excitement, intrigues and fast-paced action”. (6)

Thriller movies combine all of these elements but are not restricted to exploring more dramatic elements in its rendition. Nwaozuzu goes further to say that “The essence here is to stimulate the mood of the viewer or reader to a very high level of anticipation through the use of elements such as anxiety, uncertainty terror, and suspense and plot complexity” (6). It has been observed by the researcher during the selection of the case study, that many Nigerian Films that could be classified as thriller possess one or two of the above mentioned elements. In the light of this, the film selected for the study possesses the entire

aforementioned characteristics and more. Quoting James Patterson's as quoted by Nwaozuzu, James postulation on the thriller tradition are as follows:

Thriller provides such a rich literary feast. There are all kinds. The legal thriller, spy thriller, action-adventure thriller, medical thriller, police thriller, romantic thriller, historical thriller, political thriller, religious thriller, high-tech thriller, military thriller. The list goes on and on, with new variations constantly being invented. In fact, this openness to expansion is one of the genre's most enduring characteristics. But what gives variety of thrillers a common ground is the intensity of emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration, of excitement and breathlessness, all designed to generate that all-important thrill. By definition, if a thriller doesn't thrill, it's not doing its job. (111)

The case study of this research possesses or combined some of the above mentioned thrillers and that makes it suitable for the analysis.

### **Thriller Theory as a Panacea for Quality Production in Nollywood Films**

The adherence to basic principles of film making as harnessed by theories of film production has been the core of this study, it is a truism that the Nigerian Film Industry has grown over the years and has become a subject matter of intellectual dissertation. The productions of films such as *Last Flight to Abuja* (2012) and *The Mirror Boy* (2011) by Obi Emelonye, *Ije* produced in 2010 by Chineze Anyene, *Phone Swap* (2012), by Kunle

Afolayan among others, are good examples of this laudable growth and reflection of provisions of theories in film production. The sustenance of this growth consequently becomes the focal point this study examines in this chapter. However, the adherence of the director of the selected case study to the generic conventions of thriller films is of great importance in analysing Ernest Obi's *Idemili season 1*.

The selected film has narrative and narrative structures that distinguish it from many other films produced in the country. The narrative of a film is commonly made up of the storyline and other narrative elements. The narrative structure of a film on the other hand is the way the narrative is developed and presented to the audience. Like the majority of plays, novels, and fictional television shows, most Nigerian films are hinged on narrative techniques and *Idemili season 1* is not exceptional. The narrative structures of the aforementioned film ensured that the events are placed in the correct order to make sense and create meaning to the audience. According to Thomas Caldwell "The narrative is made up of two elements – the story and the plot. All events that occur in a film are part of one, if not both." (116).

The analytical approach is in line with Caldwell's proposition since all events that are depicted by the films as viewed by the audience belong to both story and plot. The plot in this milieu stands for all the events depicted in the film plus all the non-diegetic elements such as the soundtrack and credit sequences, while the story contains all events that happen in the "world" of the film whether they happen on screen for the audience to see or not. Caldwell believes that story is the film's diegesis since the story exists entirely in the world of the film. In other words, Films may not exist without proper narrative structures. This may be true, because if a film had no narrative structure then its events would



occur randomly, there would be no character development and the film would have no meaning. However, the generic demands of each film influences the nature, structure and presentation of its narrative, the film selected for this study is examined to know if the director followed this trend in his attempts to produce films in the thriller traditions. The narrative is developed as a chain of causes and effects.

For any film to suit the thriller genre, it must have characters that are made up of various desires, emotions, psychological profiles, attitudes, beliefs and experiences. To sustain growth and enhance professionalism in the Nigerian Film Industry, the filmmakers may need to adhere to theoretical provisions of specific genre (s) like some other film industries in the world. Having discussed the elements and conventions of the thriller genre in the lines above, it is pertinent to note here that one or two genres could be explored in the production of one film or seen separately in one film.

#### **A Theoretical Appraisal of Ernest Obi's *Idemili season 1***

Art as an expression of inner most feelings succeeds by reinvigorating the habitual, ordinary perception with which we encounter everyday life. If general perception is apt to become habitualized and automatic, art functions to renew everyday life experience by restoring salience to the act of perceiving. Practical perception nullifies the sensation of things, but a well made film recovers palpability both of perception and of the things perceived. Shklovsky's famous dictum says that "Art exists... to make the stone stony" (12). The value of such artworks rests in their ability to sharpen our perception, the film *Idemili* forces the viewer to perceive the familiar and common places as 'unfamiliar' and

strange following the thriller generic conventions. According to James Patterson's discourse, "thriller elements include mystery, fictional characters, captivity, opinion about historical events, and combination of colours, horror, unravelling mystery, sensation, crime, and emotional excitements" (111). The idea finds an echo in the 1930s writing of classical film, theorist Rudolf Arnheim, who argues that the film object is transformed by the formal properties of film. Such properties, Rudolf claims "Sharpen (the object), and impose a style upon it, point out special features, and make it vivid and decorative" (57).

Thus, film theorists constantly seek fresh ways to defamiliarise habitual perception. Thompson in his defamiliarization theory explains why artworks change in relation to their historical contexts and why defamiliarization can be achieved in an indefinite number of ways. It is of prime importance to note here that virtually all art forms defamiliarize the everyday world in order to make it thrill; this 'defamiliarization' becomes important tool in exploring thriller genre in the film *Idemili season 1*. The film *Idemili* is hinged on an historical events of the people of Ama-itenani. (Nine Villages) The contextual meaning of the word "Idemili" is the combination of two Igbo words "Ide" (Pillar) and "Mili" (Rain). Samuel Okeke of Oraukwu in an interview with the researcher says that; Idemili means:

...Pillar that holds the cloud, and stops rain from unleashing its negative potentials on the people, because when you have too much rain, the crops will not grow well, as there will be no sunshine that will help the yam tendrils to grow higher, mankind would have no place to live because the rain would wipe or flood out their respective homes. (Oral interview)

Therefore in order to save mankind from ruin, the goddess Idemili, holds the rain in the cloud and releases it at interval for mankind to flourish, as such, it is expected that mankind perform some rites of propitiation and sacrifices to appease the goddess if there is any misdeed.

The film title as well as the events it presents is very familiar to the people of Ogidi, Oraukwu, Ojoto, Alor, Obosi, Umuoji, Nnobi, Nnokwa, Abatete, among other communities, in Idemili North and South Local Government Areas of the present Anambra State. The late Chinua Achebe who was an Idemili son, in his novel titled *Arrow of god*, talks about the imprisonment of Eke Idemili by Ezeulu's son Oduche, and bemoans the relegation of a people's culture and the enthronement of imperialist culture on the people of Umuaro. Emeka Nwabueze adapting this novel into a play text titles it *When the Arrow Rebounds* and gives more insight into the efficacy of Eke Idemili and what the people of Umuaro stand to lose when the symbolic representation of Idemili is imprisoned, No wonder the shrine of Ulu is desecrated, the harvest of the New Yam which is symbolic to the people is put on hold, Ezeulu, the chief Priest loses his first son Obika, calamities befall the clan of Umuaro.

Ezeulu in one of his turbulent periods has this to say "Idemili, are you laughing at me? What have I done? Ulu why do you desert me? (72) These are the concise historical background of Ernest Obi's Film *Idemili*. In other words, the sacredness of Idemili has been established in the minds of the audience, its efficacy and fierce nature are well known to the people as such, they (Audience) tread with caution as witnessed in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Emeka Nwabueze's *When the Arrow Rebounds*. Having established the above historical background of the people, the Film Director now has an exigent task of

unravelling the mysteries behind the familiar object (Eke Idemili) to a particular people.

In *Idemili* season 1, Ernest Obi explores the relationship between man and the supernatural using a thriller genre of the Idemili deity of the Anambra people. The director blends the potency of Idemili with a romance between the goddess and a mere mortal, the character of Ekemma is played by Esin Evlyn and Okwadike played by Uche Odoputa. Idemili becomes the obstacle that threatens the love life of these two love birds. The narrative of the film thus focuses on how this barrier between gods and man can be bridged. The conversation between Ekemma's Mother and Okwadike cements the assumption that the ways of the gods must be obeyed by mortals even when they threaten the very essence of man's existence;

**Ekemma's Mother:** Your intensions are good but my daughter Ekemma is no man's wife

**Okwadike:** Nne I understand the ways of the gods

**Ekemma's Mother:** Then you will also understand that my daughter is one with gods, the essence of the nine villages that make up Ama-itenani...Patience, the son of mother earth, when she does becomes the priestess of Idemili; she will choose you as her mate

**Okwadike:** Only to father a child for the deity and never to be a husband?

**Ekemma's Mother:** Who are we to question the gods.

The above narrative appeals more to some Nigerian youths who belittle traditions, norms, custom and ethos of the society. Okwadike believes in his strength as a free-born of the community

and as a great hunter of the time that what he wants is what he gets. He desires Ekemma who is destined to take the mantle of priesthood from her mother, she is to become no man's wife, she is to complete the necessary ritual of passage in order to avoid impending doom that awaits her people if the compulsory rites are left out.

The opening sequence of the film buttresses the thrilling and captivating element that thrills the audience. Ekemma is suddenly confronted with three pillars of water that sprang up from the ground and metamorphoses into three horrifying elemental creatures, reminding Ekemma of her mission and where she belongs. The transformation of the three horrifying creatures is also accompanied with colour changes from the previous one thereby establishing the appearance of supernatural beings on set. Colour is one of the elements that thriller conventions experiment with in order to create supernatural environment of the thriller film and give it credence and believability. The elaborate make up of this fictional characters and the transitional nature of the three pillars of water into three elemental creatures become indispensable tools in accessing the level of thrilling elements inherent in this scene. The suspense builds up in the mind of the audience whom has been presented with the super-natural essence of Idemili and how Okwadike, a mere mortal confronts this deity thrills the audience. The implication here is that Okwadike is either ignorant of the strength of Idemili and the danger involved in the confrontation or that he is a brave young man.

However, just like the character Okonkwo, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okwadike as a tragic hero fails to know his limitations as a mortal. This trend may be likened to the attribute of some Nigerian politicians who after being elected into political offices forget their root and culture and embezzle public

funds with impunity. Lack of patience on the side of Okwadike is becoming the life style of most Nigerian youths of today. They are being influenced by the lackadaisical life styles of some American celebrities, and the vituperative nature of some of their musical videos that are glorified with nudity, vulgar lyrics and so on and so forth. The above mentioned tenets are becoming dominant culture (using physical force in achieving one's aim) in Nigeria society; the traditional, cultural values of patience and obedience to the will of the gods are gradually going into extinction.

Okwadike having acquired guns and organized some youths believes that he can undo the doing of the gods by engaging in an epic battle with the gods. The battle line is drawn between the Custodian of Idemili shrine and Okwadike, a character whom the director has infused with an unquenchable desire of getting what he wants. He goes into preparation to battle with the gods. This scene is mystifying with some thrilling elements such as smoke, faint colour, earthen pots, and the threes on the background. The character is naked, pouring hot water drawn from the earthen pots on his body. This is accompanied with non-degetic element of sound to further heighten the thrilling atmosphere in the film. In Okwadike's defense of his intension to fight the goddess Idemili, he says:

Ama-Idemili refuse to heed to my voice of reason...well I am a free-born of Amadim, the son of Osi-Oji the great; I am okwadike, the greatest hunter in Amadim, the voice of seven forest deity, Ochiagha. Today the sacredness of Ama-Idemili will be broken, for when a deity becomes insolent, its worshipers would abandoned it at the cross-road

Most Nigerian youths in recent times have found themselves in Okwadike's position; most of them have abandoned their traditions to embrace "the get it at all cost syndrome" simply because they need love and money. Some of them now see their elders as mere old men who have outlived their times; it may also be argued that gone are the days when the young see the old and their tradition as the repertoire of knowledge that needed to be tapped from.

Okwadike's threat to fight Idemili is not far from the African believe that communities create their gods and remain faithful worshippers of the created god (s) so long as it serves the purpose of protection and progress of the community. Eze Ulu's face off with Umuaro and the consequent rejection of Ulu by the people of Umuaro as recorded by Chinua Achebe in the *Arrow of God* buttresses this fact. The usefulness of the god to the community determines the level of acceptance by individual members of the community.

However, it is common good that is paramount. The collective progress overrides individual desires that may go contrary to the communal welfare, like most youths in the contemporary Nigerian society; Okwadike is not interested in the common good and collective progress in the community. His selfish desires are paramount despite whose ox is gauged. So it is not out of place that the director tries to address these issues using thriller approaches in *Idemili*. Okwadike embarks on the battle whereas Ekemma prepares to bid her late mother farewell as well as collect the spiritual strength from her. She is to supply the pass codes to enter the doorway of Oshimili shrine. This pass-codes that will enable Ekemma cross over serve as a bridge between the physical and meta-physical; it is obvious that for a mere mortal to enter into the metaphysical abode he/she must possess the gait, and assiduousness to do so. The audience watches on to see if she fails

or succeeds. The custodian of Oshimili shrine thus asks “Who knocks on the doorway of the seven rivers of Oshimili”?

**Ekemma:** It is I, Ekemma, daughter of river goddess, Otakasi, offspring of Idemili, benefactor of childless

**Custodian:** What are the seven keys to the gateways of Oshimili?

**Ekemma:** Seven precious eggs from python goddess of Idemili, seven forbidden fishes from Ogbanenu, seven coweries from mili-ene, seven bullfrogs from Otakasi, seven pieces of white chalk from Mgbologwu River, seven cups of water from Enugwu-Asa, the virginity of a maiden priestess.

These lines indicate that she passes the test and enters into the shrine of Idemili to complete the ritual. This scene unfolds a lot of mysteries to the audience; the symbol of Idemili is introduced in this scene, what some parts of the society have seen as a mere snake (Python) is given esoteric powers. The mystery behind the people’s totem is unravelled with striking thunders, and the movement of the clouds, the two elements signify, (Thunders) voices of the metaphysical beings and (Clouds) the movement of the goddess Idemili as dovetailed in the story. The movement of the clouds with thunder strikes and the camera is placed on a low angle position in order to give the impression of a powerful character behind the sky, and also to make that character dignifying. The colour of the cloud is dazzling and this is supported by thunder strikes that further keep the audience at the edge of his seat. According to Barthes Todorov, “Thriller Film is a genre that revolves around anticipation and suspense. The aim for Thrillers is to keep the audience alert and on the edge of their



seats.” (n.p) According to Sarah Boukaddour, supernatural thriller dovetails

...Elements that are unworldly mixed with suspense, tension and twists. The typical plot of a supernatural thriller is that the protagonist and the villain have supernatural powers that lead them to the source of the problem in the plot. If the plot consists of a villain with an ability of supernatural powers, this is usually caused by demons/devils/ghost which is slightly linked to the religious thriller. The reason for this is they would like it to be slightly realistic by adding religious elements to it, thus creating more tension within the audience (7).

The film *Idemili Season 1* has achieved the above characteristics in its presentation and screening.

### **Conclusion/Recommendation**

Film as an art form creates an exciting pleasure and communicates specific message (s) to the audience. It is therefore important to note here that for audience to really gain this message and knowledge from what he sees on the screen, there should be conflict in the plot of the story, the camera works should not be left out, lighting equipment is of paramount importance, costume and make-up should be designed to further tell the story, editing the film with first class editing gadgets caps it all. All these experiences and practices are needed to make movies that would give the audience larger-than-life experiences of artistic creations. To achieve this feat, the Nigerian film industry needs theoretical

framework in its operations. The study aimed at critically evaluation of film theory as quality assurance mechanism in Nollywood.

The right practice of filmmaking here stands for the use of professionals and experts in the aforementioned areas of film making rather than amateurs as often the case in Nigerian film industry. Nigerian film industry has come of age, as such; attention should be given to all facets of filmmaking. This is not to say that Nigerian film audiences have not or are not enjoying what they see on the screen, but there is need for critics to come in with theories born out of what has been placed on the screen before the audience for decades in the industry if we must compete with other giant film industries in the world.

On the other hand, the professional filmmakers are conversant with the problems in Nigeria and use their arts in proffering solutions. The issue of nation building has become a mantra in the tongues of most Nigerian politicians, but it may be argued that without proper structuring and sponsoring of the field of Arts and Humanities in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions, the notion of having a great nation may be defeated in the nearest future. From the case study analysed above, some of the youths of this great nation are restless, some of them have no regards for the collective will of the people. As such, a proper reintegration of the youths into the good tenets and ethos of the Nigerian society is needed and this could be done through the auspices of Arts and Humanities who are charged with duty of providing the moral rectitude of the society because according to the popular aphorism “The youths are the leaders of tomorrow” and their place in the nation building should not be left unfulfilled.

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