

Benin Video Film Rising: Peddie Okao on “The Eye of the Sun”

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Introduction

By all standards, the Nigerian film culture/industry (Nollywood) is a story of technological innovation and the triumph of creativity through the unrelenting doggedness of some creative minds. In the Benin¹ video film segment of Nollywood, some personalities/names have been recurring because of this commitment to talent development and artistic excellence - developing talents, critical structures of distributing, marketing and generally raising the ante in the growing industry which has been touted as a strong small and medium enterprise (SME) gizmo.² One of such personalities is Peddie Okao, a scion of the famed empire of Okao, from Avbiogbe Community in Oredo local government area (LGA) of Edo State. Peddie, the chief executive officer (CEO) of Prolens Movies Nigeria limited, is reputed to have taken the Benin video film to a whole new level with the production of *Ikoka land 2* (2003) which was subtitled in English and took the larger Nollywood by storm, featuring the likes of Olu Jacobs, Justus Esiri, among others. He has since made many other great movies such as *Udazi* (2006), *Omodion* (2008), etc.

Apart from being one of the earliest Benin filmmakers to subtitle their movies in English, Spanish and Italia and trying to establish a fully equipped film school in Benin City, Peddie has been

working on a massive film project, “The Eye of the Sun” for over four years now and this dialogue is intended to quiz this Benin film and indeed Nollywood great on issues surrounding this very important movie with a view to further stimulate or prod the minds of film critics, film theorists, filmmakers, film students, film enthusiasts, film historians, African studies scholars across Africa and in the Diasporas, etc. for better insights and perspectives that can lead to improvements in certain areas of the Nollywood film industry. The following is the transcript of my conversation with him on the 8th of March, 2015 in Benin City.

Omoera Good morning, sir. I am honoured to be granted this opportunity to meet minds with a personality like you. How has the journey been as a Benin language filmmaker?

Okao Good morning! The privilege of this conversation is mine. The journey has been most rewarding, especially so that the journey by itself has qualified my filmmaking art with the words "Benin language". This is suggestive that there is something substandard in what we do as occasioned by the language by which we do it. This has come to bear in my experiences as a filmmaker in Nigeria. I say most rewarding because by our works we have been able to put the so called Benin language film in the limelight of Nollywood as a concept, proving with the efficacy and acceptability of our works, that filmmaking and films themselves have no barriers in language but a language by itself.

Omoera Can you recall what occasioned your entry into the movie making business?

Okao I do recall with pride my active participation in stage plays in the 1960s and the greater

part of the 1970s. I started as an actor in the primary school, acting at the end of year school entertainment event. During my secondary school days, I represented my school, my local government area, and my state in inter-school drama competitions. Parental pressure did not give me the chance to develop this interest academically beyond this point. The birth of Nollywood met me as a banker, and reminded me of my interest in this field. With an accounting background, it was easy for me to think of movie making as a business. I commissioned a study on the subject in 1991. The findings of that study ushered me into the decision to disengage from the bank and engage the business of filmmaking.

Omoera At the 2nd Edo Movie and Music Academy Awards (EMMA)³ ceremony held at the

Oba Akenzua 11 Cultural Centre on November 21, 2013, you said you were glad that

filmmakers, cinematographers such as Austin Amadasun who cut their filmmaking

teeth under your tutelage are winning awards. Does this imply that you are planning to

move into other business?

Okao Not at all! That quote is not suggestive of my taking a bow! That would have meant

giving in to the supremacy of these wards! Far from it! The connotation of my stated gratitude articulates my satisfaction with my general score card as one who set out to achieve stated objectives and placed milestones to them. When I got into the industry, I had set an objective to help create a formal industry from what you may call just a practice at the time. My vision was to lead this industry while giving it direction from time to time. I engage a mission to congregate people in the actualization of this objective. My strategy was narrowed down to Human Capital Development; Dynamic but effective Film Production, and a strategic Distribution policy. So Austin Amadasum, who won the "Best Cinematographer Award" for that year, is a subject matter of my human capacity development strategy adopted over two decades ago. My expression was only an acknowledgment of this. However, I also do not wish to go into competition with the hands I have created but will remain in business to challenge them to greater heights. But my role in the industry now is to constantly engage the challenges of the times, and assist in proffering ways of having them to deal with it. Once this is achieved, their residual duty will be to celebrate me. How great can I be?



Peddie Okao, the Brain behind “The Eye of the Sun”

Omoera In an earlier interview you granted me about four years ago, you made mention of a film project, "Eye of the Sun", it is about four years now and we are yet to witness the premier of this movie. Is it that you have abandoned this project or what is

clogging its release considering time lag?

Okao "Eye of the Sun" is a project dear to my heart. It is a business that is projected to create wealth for both the producer and the Nigerian nation. But more importantly, it is a project that will reconcile an age-long conflict of two great kingdoms in Africa while ensuring cultural congruence in the face of cultural diversity. How can I abandon such a project? It is not in my interest to do that. The interview I granted you then was the first mention of "Eye of the Sun" to the public. Before then we had spent about two years on the research of that story. We had just completed the script treatment and development. The final draft of the script was commissioned the very next week. Six months later, we presented the final script to a script conference and had our final review, and communicated to the traditional institutions for verification of facts. When we were through with this, we sent the script to our business development unit to deal with the issues of production budget, and income projections. They returned with a budget of a hundred million naira. First, we do not have that kind of money, so what are our possible sources of finance? Secondly, how do we generate business for this movie to recoup the huge budget? We had to call in our financial managers who gave us some recommendations after a detailed study of the financial indices of the project. We have been working on these. However, we have presented this script and the project to many festivals across the globe! Yes! As a script! It was in two cities of Scotland. It has gone to the US, many countries in Africa, and has actually made its rounds here in Nigeria.

This acceptability drive has been on for two years and has been very effective. Some persons have keyed into it, and we are expecting more to do the same. But read my lips! “Eye of the Sun” will hit the silver screen soon.

Omoera What is this film really all about?

Okao It is about two great kingdoms in Africa. About who is the father of what royalty among them; about the expediency of a journey undertaken for many decades as restitution for the many images reflected by the eye of the sun. It is about what binds these two kingdoms in the face of their diversities. “Eye of the Sun” will chronologically attest to the claim of how Ile-Ife gave out one of their princes, on demand, to re-establish monarchy in the kingdom of Benin during the 1100 -1200AD. But “Eye of the Sun” will be asking: what made that journey expedient for both the Benis and the people of Ife? But more importantly, it will provide facts that will help the audience understand congruence in the diversity of their individual claims of who is the father of what royalty. “Eye of the Sun” holds in trust for destiny, the many faces of Oduduwa.⁴

Omoera Why this long time considering the gestation period of the average Nollywood film
which averages between 6 months to one year?

Okao Nollywood has no structured distribution framework on the ground. None that is auditable, bankable, and dependable! The existing structure has not been aligned to the main stream Nigerian economy.

When you throw a movie costing that much into such market, piracy will take the rest from you. As an organisation, we needed to take time off the project to work out distribution plans that can guarantee return on investment. We are at the verge of unveiling our Holistic Distribution and Piracy Solution Project. Once activated, we will be good to go!

Omoera In view of what you said, “Eye of the Sun” is a mega budget movie. How are you sourcing the fund?

Okao Usually, film production is distribution guaranteed project. Our distribution arm of the company is giving a thirty percent guarantee of projected income from screenings and other ancillary revenues from the movie. As producers we will provide thirty percent of the rest. What is left is being funded by banks, grants, and new equity or debentures. We already have some people paying a discounted present sum, to watch the movie when it is finally, out. Simply put, they pay one thousand naira today, to buy a seat of one thousand five hundred naira when the film is out. Besides, they will be the first to watch it. We already have a handful of them, and a good test of how the film will be patronised.

Omoera Has the recent government promises of support to Nollywood industry players been really forthcoming?

Okao Like you called it, it is a “promise”. We cannot plan a project like “Eye of the Sun” on

promises. We are predicating this project on legal deals. Enforceable obligations! However, government promises are coming in. For instance, some of the hands we are using for the project have been trained by government. Some of them abroad! The film fund window is already opened and some people have received monies. We have another medium budget project – “Agbonaye” (The world we are in) which they just approved of. But you know, they control the process and they give very little. Nonetheless, they are giving! It might interest you to know that the story-subject of “Agbonaye” – our current production sets in contemporary Edo State society, written around four friends who vows to engage university education which their individual resources could not afford. They constitute themselves into a consortium in a farming vocation with an arrangement to finance themselves through university in turns. But events take a twist when the first beneficiary, now a banker declines his contribution to the next in line. The conflict deepens when the leader of the consortium, in an effort to expand the farmland to make up for the upset, cuts down a tree which falls on his leg leading to an above-the-knee amputation of his right leg. What subsequently transpires in the management of the conflict and eventual resolution of this story is what we are set to avail our enthusiastic audiences in the next couple of months.

Let me quickly add that Agbonaye is a medium budget film of about N13million, but the highest in the history of Benin (Edo) language movies. It is supported by the Federal

Government of Nigeria (FGN) through the Project Act Programme of President Goodluck Jonathan with the sum of N5million. But most importantly, it is creating jobs for about one hundred Edo indigenes directly. The language of production of this movie is Benin, and it is being shot in "RED". The RED is film format equipment second only to the "Celluloid". The "Drone" is also being employed to enhance its production. The sound is being recorded in two different ways: One comes from the boom to the camera through a sound mixer; the other is an independent recording of sound as in celluloid. The RED records in 4k resolution and have the capacity of recording its footage in raw format. These are files that are heavy enough to crash the usual editing systems in Nigeria. This production is also parading the best hands in the local industry here: Johnbull Eghianruwa, Eunice Omeregic, Osasuyi West, Degbuyi Oviahon, Frances Osunde, OKH Azugbene, and Peddie Okao are in the lead roles for "Agbonaye." We shall be shooting in Benin City, Lagos, and in Europe. The movie is expected to hit the cinemas in December 2015.

Omoera What plans do you have to recoup this amount considering the problematic distribution

and marketing points in the chain of Nollywood industry?

Okao I spoke earlier on Prolens Distribution and Piracy Solution agenda! Prolens Movies

Limited is working out a distribution plan to ensure we recoup this investment. A five thousand all-in service terminal project is being activated. This will be driven by five hundred micro cinema structures with each serving as

hub to ten service terminals. “Eye of the Sun” will be exhibited in this chain for about six months before it goes outside this territory of distribution. When it gets on the DVD window it will also be shelved within this chain that will be providing five thousand, five hundred sales points across the country. We shall be exploring the internet window on the Prolens Movies portal. The broadcast window will be the last of the streams on the Prolens Movies Television (a pay per view television project).

Omoera You are reputed to have redefined the art and science of moviemaking in the Benin

language film sector of Nollywood with the making of the film entitled *Ikoka* (2003).

Is the “Eye of the Sun” different from this?

Okao I do not know I have such reputation. I humbly accept it as a complement. If *Ikoka* met

such criteria, then we must give glory to God. But we did not set out to redefine the art and science of moviemaking. We planned to make a good movie using the best tools available and affordable at the time. We planned to tell a good story in a chronological sequence that will impact on society. We set out to employ diligence in interpreting the cultural experiences and nuances of a people without abusing their values. We did this to ennoble a nation, secure societal values, and educate audiences in the process of making familiar things look new. But it will not be out of place to say that the product of this diligence took moviemaking to another level. "Eye of the Sun" may not be found wanting in

these respects. But it sure will have more. This may make it different in some sense.

Omoera In what specific ways can you measure this difference?

Okao First, *Ikoka* set in 1705AD, but "Eye of the Sun" set in 1100AD. As reality stories, we

will need greater diligence in representing characters that played about nine hundred years before our time. We must show to our audience the evolution of our race over time, and how this affected the outcomes of the conflicts generating in the story. Secondly, *Ikoka* played within a given territory and managed a mono cultural connectivity. But Eye of the Sun is a multi-cultural and multi lingual story that must show effective reconciliation of differing experiences to prove connectivity in order to sue for higher human capital. Thirdly, the tools we employed in the making of *Ikoka* have all become obsolete. "Eye of the Sun" is going to be technically more robust. This probably may account for the difference in the imaging of "Eye of the Sun". But the presentation of the sequence of "Eye of the Sun" may not be chronological. It is going to come with a careful play of a flash within a flash, and some of these flashes may be backwardly integrated or forward infusing, introducing about four conflicts at a time and having to resolve them convincingly at different points in the timeline. *Ikoka* played on a generation even though quoting other generations, but "Eye of the Sun" is playing three generations. How we manage generational changes in characters, environment, props etc., is one factor that will infuse a difference into this movie. These will sure present a more detailed work, and a

richer presentation that may also find the capacity to redefine the art and science of filmmaking in the Benin language film sector.



[Davidson Izegaegbe](#) and Peddie Okao technically meeting minds on location

Omoera What has been the greatest challenge in making this movie?

Okao Well, “Eye of the Sun” is still in the making. We are still in the pre-production stage. I cannot measure my challenges at this time. I may have to grant you another interview when I am done.

Omoera Do political influences have anything to do with your activities as a cineaste?

Okao As one involved in the making of a film, my objective is to tell a story, a good story for that matter. I tell these stories from a particular point of view, and some other times, I represent multiple points of views. But I try to present these views without bias and in some cases leave the judgment to the audience. Although one is forced to make a judgment in some instances, rest assured that it is not politically influenced as this may reduce the commercial viability of the movie.

Omoera Could it be right to say that you have a proclivity towards making politico-historical films?

Okao That may not be the best way to describe my preferences or tendencies as it relates to

this particular genre. When I take on a historical film, I do not take it on because of its political status but for its cultural wealth. I find better connectivity in cultural plays. But the politics of relativity is forced on me in interpreting cultural films. So it is not really by preference. More so, not all historical stories are cultural, e.g., *Anini*. However, I enjoy historical plays; they remind you of whom you are.

Omoera Does it bother you that films are hardly made in the documentary format in the Benin subsector of Nollywood?⁵

Okao It bothers me a lot. But we have to understand the issues of documentary and the sensitivity of audience to this genre. Documentary is a film purely dealing with facts, and tries to convey reality as it is. It is concerned with actual people, places, and events. But the filmmaker controls this reality and stands a chance of swaying the audience. The Benin film audiences prefer a film that presents familiar things. But once there is distortion of facts, they are easily lost. But it bothers me. And I am doing something about it. Finding the market for it is the major challenge.

Thank you, sir for contributing to the Benin video film culture which has established itself as a viable variant of Nollywood that commands a burgeoning viewership as a result of its propagation of Benin language, history and culture.

Notes

1. Benin (and not Bini) which is interchangeably used with Edo in this work is the language spoken in the southern part of Edo State. It is also used to refer to the people found in this area. According to the Benin Traditional Council - Palace Press Release, Ref. No. BTC.A66/VOL.IV/262 dated 28th August, 2006. "Our attention has been drawn to the practice in which some persons in correspondence to the Palace and publications in the newspapers and magazines refer to Benin as 'Bini'. It is hereby stated for the information of the general public that our correct ethnic name is Benin and not 'Bini', and that our people are to be referred to as Benin people or simply Benin. The Omo N'Oba requests that the use of 'Bini' should stop forthwith. Individuals, government agencies, corporate organizations, print and electronic media, and the general public should please take note". Signed (actual signature) Chief S. O. U Igbe, MON, Iyase of Benin on behalf of all Benin Chiefs.
2. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2010. Analysis of the UIS international survey of feature film statistics: Nollywood rivals Bollywood in film/video production. Retrieved April 13, 2010, from http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=7651_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC
3. I was the jury president of the 2nd Edo Movie and Music Academy Awards (EMMA).
4. A lot of controversies still surround this issue and there is need for more critical enquiries into it.

5. This was one of the issues that emanated from my Ph.D. work at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.