

THE IGBO ETHNIC NATIONALITY

Key Players in the Nigerian Video Film Industry

Friday Nwafor

Theatre Arts Department
University of Port Harcourt,
Nigeria.

Introduction

In south-eastern Nigeria, archaeological sites confirm sophisticated civilizations dating from at least ad 900, when fine bronze statues were crafted by predecessors of the modern-day Igbo people. These early peoples, who almost certainly had well-developed trade links, were followed by the Nri ... (Microsoft, 2006)

The story of the video film industry in Nigeria cannot be told without mentioning the contributions of the Igbos of South-East Nigeria. In fact the Igbo ethnic group have played a central role in the development of the Industry. That the stories and the locations are predominantly eastern is simply in accordance and agreement with the popular saying that he who pays the piper detects the tune. This is not to say that the Industry is ethnic in outlook, but the special mercantile approach of the Igbos has truly brought the activities of the Industry to the fore before the world. It is on account of these contributions that Nollywood is born. Following the history of film making in Nigeria starting from the use of celluloid, reversal stock TV serials etc, it is evident that Nigerians have continued to make videos in different languages without much success until the release of *Living in Bondage* (1992) by Nek Videos. As Hussein (30) has observed:

In 1992, actor and producer, Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, a.k.a Paulo approached movie marketer (and later

producer), Kenneth Nnebue of NEK Video Links Limited with a proposal to invest in the production of the popular home movie in Igbo language *Living in Bondage*. He and indeed Nnebue could not imagine that the experiment will throw up a phenomenon that movie making has now become.

The stories there- after have been that of a pacesetter, a film that introduced glamour like never before, a film that promoted the traditions and culture of Nigeria like never before and sold both the English and Igbo versions successfully. It is not an accident that Enugu, Aba and Owerri- all cities of the south-east serve as locations for the production of video films in Nigeria till date. The same geographical zone parade several actors, actresses, directors, executive producers etc in the industry. The distribution or marketing of finished works rests in the hands of the same easterners who are in charge of the outlets located in Idumota (Lagos), Upper Iwaka (Onitsha) and Pound Road (Aba) respectively.

It is very important at this moment in the development of the industry to put the record straight for documentation purposes, else history may be misconceived with time, giving the speed with which Nollywood has gained and is still gaining popularity as the third largest film industry in the world. It is also very necessary that the history of film in Nigeria be written alongside the events since the only thing that is constant in life is change. Of course the drift of the industry is subject to change and that will form another part of history too.

This research is geared towards documenting in concrete terms using available data the contributions of the Igbos to the thriving video film industry in Nigeria. We shall trace the Development of Film and Video in Nigeria. Sponsorship, Distribution and Marketing of Video Films in Nigeria, and finally Problems and Prospects of the Video Film Industry in Nigeria.

Development of Film/ Video in Nigeria

The structure of the film industry was evolved from three crucial socio-economic stages: the colonial/ pre-independence period, the post independence period and the post indigenization decree period. (Ekwuazi 1)

“The first film screenings in Nigeria took place at Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, on ten consecutive nights from 12 August 1903. Significantly, but hardly surprisingly, a Nigerian - Herbert Macaulay - managed its affairs, and Messrs Balboa of Spain screened the film”(Owens-Ibie 1). Shaka (2) gives credence to the position above by stating that “ film as a medium of mass communication and entertainment is essentially a colonial inheritance”. He explains that emphasis was on distribution and exhibition. Some critics argue that productions undertaken in the colonial period were documentaries used to promote colonial government policies on agriculture, infrastructural development etc. A Colonial Film Unit (CFU) was set up during the outbreak of the Second World War. A full unit of the Colonial Film Unit was later created in 1945 and re-christened the Federal Film Unit (FFU) in Nigeria in 1946 with N.F. Spur as the first Film Officer. Some Nigerians were sent to Ghana to study in Accra Film Training School. They include Adamu Halilu, Fajemisin, A.J.Atigba, and Malam Yakubu Aina.

According to Ekwuazi

by the end of 1960, the structure of the film industry in the country completely altered. The structure placed the Federal Government at the top of the ladder.

Subsequently, by the 1970s filmmakers like Ola Balogun, Eddy Ugbomah, Francis Oladele, Sanya Dosumu and Jab Adu emerged.

Hence in Nigerian film industry, 1975 is significant because it was when truly indigenous full-length feature films emerged. (sic) which was Ola Balogun's *Amadi* (1975) in Igbo and Dosumu's *Dinner with the Devil* (1975). (Nwakauche, 2002: 14).

The promulgation of decree No 61 of 1979 established a statutory corporate body, the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC). Ekwuazi states that when the national currency was devalued, it became impossible to shoot on celluloid or sustain the theatres, cinema practitioners caught the wind of change triggered by the structural adjustment programme. They went from cine to reversal stock film making in a smooth transition. When the practitioners noticed slight unease among the audience, possibly on account of mercurial colour schema of the reversal film, they took a quick refuge in the video film format.

Shaka (17) argues that apart from the devaluation of the Nigerian currency, urban crime was already affecting cinema theatre attendance. Most of the cinema theatres were dilapidated, poorly ventilated, and were regarded as dens of petty criminals. The patronage of the cinema theatre was therefore on a downward trend prior to the introduction of SAP. He submits that as a result of the aforementioned problems, television had taken a foothold as a medium of family entertainment. Producers in response to the scarcity of foreign exchange reverted to their old production base of drama to survive. Some used corporate bodies while others co-produced with foreign producers.

Uge on his part notes that Solomon Eze and Ade Ajiboye shot improvised stories with camcorders and then transferred to VHS tapes respectively in the 1990s but the Igbo practitioners turned it into a commercial engagement with the production of *Living in Bondage* in 1992. Successes recorded in the new found romance with the video format necessitated the establishment of Decree NO.85 which was published in the official gazette No. 25 (Vol.80)

of 1st December, 1993. It is a repeal of the 1963 cinematography Act. One of the functions of the board includes keeping a register of all films and video works in the country.

Video Film Sponsorship, Distribution and Marketing

The majority of the video films produced in Nigeria are sponsored by Igbo traders selling electronics or motor parts at either Idumota Street, Lagos or at Upper Iweka Road/Main Market at Onitsha. These merchants/executive producers also constitute the marketers, and by virtue of this fact, they dictate what goes on in the industry. (Shaka 184)

The fact in the view above is not far from being correct given the list of companies that are on record to be in the business of continued sponsorship of video films in Nigeria till date. These merchants haven realised how strategic they are in the scheme of affairs pertaining the video film industry had taken several steps towards asserting themselves if we will recall. These moves include the regulation of film releases as was reported by Justice Akpovi-Esade in *The Guardian Newspaper* of Thursday, January 18, 2001 with the title 'Marketers Set to Tame Rage of Movie Release'. The writer comments on the attempt by the Nigerian Video Marketers Association (NVMA) to checkmate the proliferation of video works in the movie market. Some of the measures they had adopted he says include- the release of video works every first Monday of the month, the limiting of the release of the number of Yoruba, Igbo and English works to eight in a fortnight. All of these efforts by the merchants have not yielded any dividends. According to him, close followers of the industry holds the National Film and Censors Board (NFVCB) responsible. The argument remains that the board stands in a position to regulate the number of films they approve monthly and by so doing, control what will be available to the merchants.

It is not also news that the same electronic merchants turned executive producers, distributors and marketers on grounds of insincerity on the part of the producers and now stay in camp or visit locations regularly during recording. They have also succeeded in banning artists for either being too proud or charging fees they considered rather too high in 2001. The artists remained banned until 'the movie barons' decided to un-ban star performers like Sam Dede, Jim Iyke, Ramsey Noah, Genevieve Nnaji, Richard Mofe Damijo, Omotola Jelade, Victor Osuagwu amongst others.

They are also so influential that they dictate who plays a role. Most often we find relations, friends and sometimes the merchants playing roles without any consideration of character interpretation etc. Given the strength of their positions, some negative factors have naturally cropped up, given the Nigerian experience. In fact this is where the issue of sex scandal in Nollywood cannot be glossed over, although the producers, directors, production managers and others behind the scene cannot claim total innocence. The distribution/marketing of movies also rests in the hands of the same merchants whose shops are located at Idumota-Lagos, Upper-Iweka Onitsha and Pound Road-Aba respectively. Almost all the movies in circulation today in Nigeria are released in the market of the 'barons'. Their network is so organised that it is almost impossible to break the chain. You either pass through them or you end up passing few copies of your film on to the viewing audience. In fact an attempt to break the monopoly may have motivated the establishment of an alternative market in Lagos. Thus as Esade (67) reports in 2003:

In spite of criticism mounting against the proposed Movie Makers Co-operative, the market would start from today. The three-day opening ceremony would culminate in the opening of the movie market on Babs Animashaun street, off Bode Thomas Surulere

by the governor of Lagos state, Ahmed Bola Tinubu at 11am on Sunday.

The question now is- how far has the alternative market fared? Of all the films released in the industry after the market was opened, how many were from the market? There is yet a new stratagem whereby the Nigerian movie is now hawked on the streets of our cities during traffic congestion hours by no other ethnic group than the Igbos. The Igbo merchants have succeeded in taking the making of video films to the east. A great percentage of Nigerian films are shot in Enugu, Aba or Asaba.

Enugu otherwise called the 'coal city' is reputed to have provided the nest for the production of the bulk of the movies that have been released in recent times. Industry operators maintained that it is cheaper to shoot in Enugu than any other part of Nigeria. Inhabitants of the coal city freely allow the use of their properties, as location and props, hotels are cheap and so is the cost of postproduction and cost of engaging the talents that are liberally called 'waka pass'. (Husseini B22)

This is not arguable given the several landmarks of the coal city noticeable in the movies. The choice of locations and the use of props in different productions also confirm the position above. By so doing, jobs are created for the local people and other businesses are encouraged. This initiative by the Igbo merchants consciously or unconsciously continue to sustain their position as having the highest number of players in the industry. The medium has also served as a vehicle for the promotion of the culture and traditions of the ethnic nationality. The Igbos and their way of life are so exemplified in the stories that one can not but recognise the people's culture at any given time. The story line, characters, locale,

language nuances, music, costumes and make-up are most of the time culture specific.

Conclusively, the Igbos of South-East Nigeria known for their enterprising attributes have continued to contribute immensely to the development and perpetuation of the Nation's Video Film Industry.

Problems and Prospects of Video Film Industry in Nigeria

Like every other area of human endeavour, the Video Film Industry is faced with challenges which if surmounted will contribute to her development and growth. These problems include lack of adequate sponsorship, participation of non professionals, poor distribution network, censorship problem, lack of legislation, lack of organisation by practitioners, lack of innovation, existence of a cabal, etc.

The sponsorship of Nigerian Video Films by individuals will continue to influence and affect the quality of films produced, since businessmen invest in the industry in order to make profit in the shortest time possible. Films are shot in seven days and released for public viewing as soon as editing is completed and approval given by the Censors Board.

The inability of practitioners to organise themselves in the direction of having a respected video film industry is yet a serious challenge. A situation where they professionals cut corners by engaging quacks or playing several roles just to maximise profit in their own jobs with the final result being the release of low quality videos which they have often blamed on the 'Idumota' marketers who sponsor the films. Practitioners continue to pay eye service to the executive producers/marketers just to remain in their good books at the expense of quality and standard. Blackmail is also another fundamental problem in the industry; some practitioners are in the habit of destroying fellow artists simply to gain the favour of a perceived executive producer.

The recycling of stories, titles, costumes, locations etc is yet another serious limitation of the video film industry in Nigeria. The inability of writers and producers in the industry to recognise the deference between scenes and sequences and what constitutes a complete story before the releasing of works to the public in several parts in order to maximise profit is not helping matters too.

The refusal of established practitioners to accept new members into the professional guilds simply for lack of required experience is also not giving room for the injection of new ideas into the industry. The design of requirements for admission is made so difficult with applicants sometimes required to submit a portfolio of jobs already done, possibly as an assistant to an established member. This is unrealistic because the members prefer to work alone in order to receive high artist fees. It is the equivalence of saying that you can not get a job without an identity number when you cannot get an identity number without a job. This practise is very frustrating for the prospective member.

The National Film and Video Censors Board and Nigeria Copyright Council are also not pursuing their duties with the required vigour. They are not running with the speed the industry is racing. It is not enough to classify the works and warn about the position of the law concerning offenders but marshalling out strategies to forestall their occurrence. There is every reason to think that some of the films approved as belonging to a class are sent to Censors Board without some pictures that eventually find their way back on release and nothing concrete happens to such offenders. The Copyright Council cannot claim to have done so much when video shops and individuals still patronise themselves by way of illegal dubbing, hiring and leasing of video films.

Poor distribution network is yet a very serious challenge to the industry. The only markets recognised for the release of video films in Nigeria are Idumota, Upper-Iwaka and Pound road, Aba. Other dealers all over the country depend on these markets to

acquire new releases and of course this plays a very important role in the circulation of films in Nigeria. Giving Nigeria's population in relation to the distribution method, it is obvious that the industry has been unable to service a good percentage of Nigerians.

Lack of legislation to promote the third largest film industry in the world is also not helping matters. A situation where it has not been deemed necessary to create a ministry or department or to allocate any funds to sustain it as a viable industry has continuously portrayed Governments non involvement.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to document the contributions of the Video Film Industry practitioners of South-East extraction, while also exraying the problems of the Video Film Industry (Nollywood). It has among other things examined the role of practitioners, regulators and observers. There is no doubt that if the challenges outlined in this paper are given the required attention, the industry will move from the third largest film industry in the world to greater heights in no time.

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