

Advancing Indigenous African Values and Ethos for Film Directing and Production in Nollywood

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Abstract

For several decades, African film narratives and directorial approaches have been tailored towards the western modes of theoretical postulations and production patterns. This is due to the widely accepted conventional training modules and curricula which were and still are based on European ideas, values and styles, with little or no regard for the unique African theatrical and performative styles. This study, therefore, aims at investigating certain indigenous cultural and historical activities such as folktales, myths and legends that can provide raw materials for film and video drama in Africa; and thus serve as a basis for the evolution of new theoretical standpoints for producing works in the motion picture industry on the continent. Using the cultural norms and agenda-setting theories as frameworks, the study focuses on Nigeria, drawing relevant data from selected ethnic groups across the country, such as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, Benin, etc. The study is expected to evolve relevant indigenous theories on African oral tradition, folktales, myths and legends as parameters for creating and producing films and video works that are authentically African.

Keywords: Nollywood, Movie directing, Indigenous culture, African values, Video films.

Introduction

Following its emergence in 1992, Nigeria's motion picture industry, better known as Nollywood, has come of age. Its eventual success as a private sector-driven venture further birthed a new and developing culture of film production and distribution. Thus Nollywood which was preceded by the celluloid cum television modes of movie and drama production has since become a major entertainment outlet for most Nigerians and audiences in the diaspora, aside from drawing many experienced and prospective artists to its fold. The success recorded by Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1&2) in 1992 (Okhakhu and Bardi 230) revolutionised the Nigerian motion picture sector, turning it into a major income-generating sub-sector and creating employment opportunities for all categories of practitioners. At the same time, the deregulation of the Nigerian broadcast sector by Ibrahim Babangida's administration through Decree 38 of 1992 and Decree 55 as amended, further boosted the Nollywood invention and ultimately led to the development of different genres in subsequent years.

It is, however, significant that as Nollywood continued to grow, it was doing so with the emergence of several genres; and in reaction to the prevalent atmosphere in the country from time to time. So, when the era of ritual killing for riches and witchcraft reached its zenith in the early 1990s, Nollywood professionals also swung into action by producing films that mirrored the period. The era thus coincided with the production of *Living in Bondage* and a few others in the same genre (Shaka 243). Another genre that emerged shortly after the era of ritual killing and witchcraft was the epic-historic form which ushered in films that projected indigenous cultural values and endowments. This type of film, according to Ayakoroma, attempted to reconstruct the African (nay Nigerian) historical and cultural past, aside from showcasing African legends, myths, heroes and heroines as well as memorable events in the society (90). This article, therefore, highlights the essence of African (indigenous) modes in the directing, production and marketing of films. The study also deviates from the conventional mode of using Euro-centric approaches to direct and produce films but moves on to identify certain methods and theories that are uniquely African in the process of producing films on the continent. While most Nollywood directors are already in the habit of producing their works in line with or imitating foreign methods and values, this

study proposes directorial methods and theories that are uniquely African and which can henceforth be adopted by home-grown movie directors.

Nollywood, Movie Directing and African Values

Nollywood is generally used to describe the Nigerian motion picture industry. The term is fashioned after the American motion picture industry better known as Hollywood and its Indian counterpart called Bollywood. Nollywood is believed to be a sobriquet for the Nigerian film industry and can be traced to the early 2000s when an American journalist, Matt Steinglass reportedly wrote an article in the *New York Times* detailing the trajectory of the emergent movie sector at the time (Alabi 1). Movie directing involves the production of a film by visualising the script while guiding the actors and technical crew to capture the vision for the screen. This definition implies that movie directing is a highly creative and intellectual process.

It combines skills of role interpretation with the creative and technical use of space, lighting and sound to entertain the audience. Movie directing also involves the creative manipulation of the camera to interpret roles and the environment to tell stories via the screen. The African indigenous culture connotes the various cultural elements and materials that make the African continent unique. Some of these values which distinguish Africa from other continents of the world are social values, religion, morals, political and economic traditions as well as aesthetic values of music, drama, art and craft, folktales, songs, myths and legends. All of these contribute to African culture.

Conceptual Framework: Film Directing as a Creative Art Form

Directing is a major creative effort which centres on the interpretation of scripts either for theatre or media productions. Directing has been defined in many ways, but the central idea about directing is what Wills describes as 'the process of transforming personal vision (of the playwright) into public performance (live theatre, audio or audio-visual presentation) (3). This definition takes cognisance of the role of the director as the chief interpreter of the script and the artistic coordinator of the entire production. In audio-visual productions such as film or video, the director's primary task is to interpret the screenplay and translate it visually to entertain the audience members. The director, in some instances, can go a step further than merely interpreting the script. He or she can alter the script's plot structure, cut the text or rearrange the scenes

to suit his authorial vision. This creative power of the screen director led to the emergence of the auteur (French word for an author) theory which explains how a director's work reflects his or her personal creative vision.

The auteur theory in film directing refers to a style in which the director is seen as the major creative force in motion pictures. This theory had its origin in France in the late 1940s when the cinematic directorial styles of Andre Bazin and Alexandre Astruc were described by American film critic Andrew Sarris as the new wave of director-as-author (NBC par.2). Based on the above, the art of directing African films and video works should accommodate certain dynamic principles and techniques that can present African filmic narratives in their positive and authentic forms. Rather than continue to rely on European or western theoretical postulations, African movie directors (Nollywood directors inclusive) should come out with home-grown theories that would enable them to tell their own stories as creatively as possible to showcase the desired positive image of the continent to the global audience. This is the point Omoera made when he put forward a theoretical model of 'homefrontism,' which speaks to a painstaking aesthetic inward-looking attitude of filmmakers in their social cultural milieu in making video films. It holds that a conscious scouring up of iconic cultural resources such as proverbs, myths, folklore, heroic exploits, kingship (or Obaship at the level of Benin) rites, pithy adages, dress patterns, among other linguistic and cultural tropes, which are yet to be fully tapped, can deepen the entertainment and cultural value of indigenous or ethnic films and other film variants in the Nollywood multi-culture (Omoera "Nollywood Unbound" 177; "Benin Video Films as Archival" 15-16).

Nollywood Directors and African Indigenous Film Narratives

Directors of Nollywood films have over the years been able to churn out works that are well-accepted both locally and abroad. A number of them who have trained abroad or who were influenced by foreign directors still keep to their Eurocentric methods of film directing while only a few are bold enough to be truly African in their interpretative roles. Also, an attempt by Nollywood directors to imitate their Hollywood counterparts in form and style has been described as a major setback in the Nigerian motion picture industry. While noting the wrong use of props by some Nollywood directors, Oreofe Williams, a film producer and director claims that:

Nigerian movie directors introduce western weapons and ammunitions and represent their homeland as a violent state perhaps because of the zeal to localise the global. Such attempts are technically suicidal because of the problems they pose to the directors and editors who try to imitate western culture. (121)

The imitation of western culture above is said to be unattractive to the mature audience who would rather go for the realistic narratives in Hollywood films other than the 'counterfeits' that are replete in Nollywood films and are 'guilty' of misrepresenting African (nay Nigeria) cultural elements. Unlike the Chinese and Indian directors who are consistent in their use of motion pictures to showcase their indigenous cultural values/heritage through costumes, make-up, dance, music and language, Nollywood directors have been accused of contributing to the gradual erosion of their culture in their films. Onuzulike observes that many Nollywood directors and filmmakers (except for Tunde Kelani and a few others) have turned their backs on Nigerian culture; owing to economic factors, audience pressure and low self-esteem in their heritage (184).

Meanwhile, many Nollywood directors and screenwriters fail in this area mainly because of they refuse to carry out research into their indigenous cultural history. Since whatever is presented as content on the screen is a direct reflection of the people and their culture. It is imperative for filmmakers to always use their works to project the positive aspects of their culture. Apart from neglecting research into African culture and heritage, most Nollywood directors are yet to fully upgrade their skills to meet the demands of the fast-growing motion picture industry. They have been accused of promoting foreign cultures to the detriment of their own culture; a situation which continues to relegate African culture to the background. In the words of Onabajo and M'bayo, there has been a missing gap between the content of many indigenous (Nigerian) films and the cultural values of the Nigerian society that they should promote, and that "the failure of Nigerian scriptwriters to extol the virtues of Nigerians and Africans, in general, is a sacrilege" (80).

Myths, Legends and Folktales as Raw Materials for African Films

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 9th edition*, a myth is a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural

events or to describe the early history of a people (1023). A myth is, therefore, similar to a legend which refers to a story from ancient times about people and events; that may or may not be true (890). A legend can also refer to a popular person or expertise, especially in a particular field who is admired by other people for what he or she knows how to do well. In Africa and Nigeria in particular, there exist hundreds and thousands of myths and legends across different ethnic and cultural groups. All of these are contained in popular events and people in history; many of which could be re-enacted or transformed into film narratives by filmmakers, scriptwriters and directors. In Nigeria alone, there are well over 500 different ethnic groups and languages, and almost every group has its diverse myths and legends as well as unique historical events or tales that are capable of being explored for motion pictures. For example, Ugwu argues that African myths serve as a major source of raw materials for the Nigerian filmmaker in telling a story through motion pictures (289). She argues further that African myths are stories of African origin, usually concerning some beings; heroes or events without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation. Accordingly, many of the characters in myths are not human beings, but in the African context, "myths always appear to deal more with the gods, the reincarnation of the dead, the origin of the worlds and mankind" (Ugwu 290).

Ben Halpern describes myths as forces that bind social groups as a whole or in other words, establish a social consensus (137). This means that myths remain sacred parts of African culture and the need to, preserve and sustain them through motion pictures. However, much as it is desirable for African (Nigerian) filmmakers to preserve and sustain mythological realities in their works, some critics of African motion pictures have blamed filmmakers for their inability to represent mythological characters that can conform to the superstition and potency ascribed to the characters in their films. Ugwu argues that "the authenticity and sacredness of some aspects of the African belief system appear questionable because of the poor representation of mythological characters in some Nollywood films...these characters should be represented in a manner that the viewing audience should willingly suspend disbelief" (291).

Perhaps, the solution to this misrepresentation today is for Nollywood directors and producers to utilise viable technologies and adopt appropriate techniques to realise the true-to-type mythological characters such that the viewing audience would not easily detect errors

or misrepresentations in their films. In other words, Nollywood directors should endeavour to depict mythological realities/characters through the critical articulation of their skills and technology. Nigerian folktales are epic stories that are capable of explaining the world around us. These stories and myths have been told for generations. The folktales include proverbs, myths, 'just go' stories and riddles. Just-go stories are designed to explain the features of an animal, such as its appearance or habits. Usually, morals are either explicitly stated at the end of the folktales or hidden within the text. Animals, especially the tortoise hold prominence in the tales from Nigeria. Many of the stories bear a resemblance with some Western folk tales; featuring magical properties, and royalties among other elements.

Some of the popular myths and legends found in different parts of Nigeria are listed below: The affair of the hippopotamus and the tortoise or 'Why the hippopotamus lives in the water. The cock that caused a fight between two towns: concerning the Leopard, the Squirrel and the Tortoise. The disobedient daughter who married a skull. Why the fish lives inside water. The king who married the cock's daughter. The story of lightning and thunder. Why does the bat fly at night? The tortoise with a pretty daughter (Wikipedia par.6). In addition to the myths listed above, there exist other legends and mythological figures in different parts of the country. For example, among the Yoruba, deities such as Ogun (god of iron), Sango (god of thunder), Oya (Sango's wife), Osun (River goddess), Moremi (the heroine of Ile-Ife), Obatala or Orisa Nla (father of all deities) and many others. In Igbo mythology, the traditional religion is known as Odinani or Omenali; though many Igbo people today have accepted Christianity as a popular religion. But the supreme God is known as Chineke (God of creation) who is believed to have created the earth and everything in it. In ancient Igbo culture, the cosmos is divided into four main parts; Okike (creation), Alusi (supernatural forces or deities), Mmuo (spirits) and Uwa (the world).

Among other ethnic groups such as Hausa, Fulani, Efik and Ijaw and Benin/Edo, there exist hundreds of myths and legends which if well explored for dramatic re-enactment, would serve as veritable raw materials/narratives for film production. A significant example is an assertion by Omoera that the Benin video films have since been well received by the audience (particularly Benin-speaking). He affirmed that this category of the audience sees the films as part of micro-national film culture in Nollywood ("Audience Reception" 69). Accordingly, a majority

of Benin viewers are "enamoured of the Benin video-film because in it they find a portrayal of their culture...the use of iconic cultural materials such as the artefacts, festivals, the language and mores of the people are perceived by the sampled audience as a projection of Benin culture (Omoera "Audience Reception" 75-76).

Representing African Cultural Elements in Nollywood Films

The African continent is blessed with numerous ethnic nationalities and groups; many of which are endowed with diverse material and non-material values. Among these are language, religion, cuisine, art and craft, music, folktales, dances, festivals and ceremonies, etc. Out of all notable elements of culture in Africa, language remains the most effective carrier and vehicle of culture promotion and preservation. Unlike what obtains in Hollywood films where filmmakers focus more on the action, the African culture thrives more on dialogue with an emphasis on verbal expressions and language mastery. This is why in Africa, language is seen as a crucial and central factor in understanding and appreciating traditional African drama. Idachaba affirms that Nollywood filmmakers have for many years been "finding traditional African language increasingly important and necessary in the conveyance of meaning and thematic construction" (6). This explains the relevance of language and dialogue in most video films whose narratives are rooted in African culture and heritage.

Closely linked to the use of language are the three elements of music, songs and dance which always promote the aesthetic values of African drama or video films. Aside from the technical use of music to depict mood, feelings or bridge scenes, music and songs are also used as signature tunes, soundtracks or transitions. They can also be creatively used by filmmakers to eulogise, criticise, mourn, ridicule or educate within the narratives of video films.

Similarly, dance, mime and choreography can be used in drama to make a statement or depict mood or action. Soyinka contends that the creative combination of songs, music and dance can play relevant roles in the construction and presentation of African drama (3). His words "they (songs, music and dance) function meaningfully in conveying messages and meaning...it is unmusical to separate Yoruba music from myth and poetry" (3). Other popular and creative elements that can enhance the production of drama and video films in Africa are festivals and ceremonies. These two elements are events that showcase the cultural

heritage and social histories of the people and their communities. While serving as social platforms for communal or ritual activities, festivals and ceremonies also serve unique entertainment and unifying purposes. This is because they provide platforms for people to gather for felicitation, merriment and celebration. Meanwhile, some of the popular festivals in Nigeria include Argungu (fishing competition) in Kebbi State, Durbar (Northern states), Ogun, Osun, Olojo, Ojude Oba, Egungun, Gelede, Sangbeto (Southwestern states) as well as new yam, Boat regatta, Calabar (Eastern and Southern states).

As a recourse to African folkloric elements, notable writers and scholars such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark, Femi Osofisan, Biodun Jeyifo and Sam Ukala have all experimented profusely through their films or plays how African theories can replace the European ones. For instance, Ukala's popular Folkism theory which is showcased in his film, *Akpakaland* and play, *Iredi War*, speaks volumes about the possibility of evolving authentic African models or formats in a dramatic production. According to Eregare, a conscious and constant application of folktales and other indigenous elements, as prescribed by Ukala would lead to the emergence of a true, home-grown African theatre/film production (8). Other aesthetic elements that could be utilised in the narratives of films are the African traditional costumes, regalia and accessories. When fully deployed by directors and filmmakers, these costumes and accessories depict indigenous cultural materials with aesthetic splendour. These materials are often used to symbolically represent certain roles and personalities in the community. For example, a royal father or monarch in Yorubaland is respected because of his crown, beads, horsetails and other accessories such as rings and sceptres. Hence, these symbolic elements are used to communicate messages about the status, position or titles of characters who put them on in the video films. Also, other members of the society such as age grades, devotees, hunters, worshippers, farmers and market women, etc., can be effectively represented by the types of costumes or accessories that they are accorded in the narratives of movies or video films.

African filmmakers are equally at liberty to make use of superstitions, folktales, riddles and legends as dramatic elements in their motion picture works. This is why drama and film critics have always described African art as utilitarian in nature. From time immemorial, Africans have always deployed artistic works (paintings, plays, sculptures, carvings, songs, etc.) for functional purposes aside from mere

entertainment. Significantly, superstitions are used by elders in Africa to teach morality, and obedience and thus prevent young people from dabbling into infractions. Superstitions can also serve as subtle measures of instilling discipline and moral values into the younger generation of Africans. Therefore, filmmakers and dramatists can utilise superstition and metaphysical elements in their works as a way of curbing immorality and criminality in society.

Conclusion

Nollywood filmmakers and directors can effectively contribute to the development of the motion picture industry as long as they respond to the challenges posed by technology without compromising the invaluable cultural heritage of the African people. They can evolve new methods and theories that are capable of enriching their works through the creative application of African culture which the country has harboured for many centuries. Although new technological innovations have brought about professionalism in the video film industry, the onus still lies with Nollywood producers not to jettison the efficacy of African indigenous cultural elements in their works. So while film directors are advised to continually upgrade their skills to meet the demands of the fast-growing motion picture industry, they should find a way of incorporating and promoting indigenous cultural values/ethos for competitive and economic advantage. In other words, Nollywood producers and practitioners should consciously utilise indigenous cultural elements in their works. They should also seek the use of these elements for content development, entertainment promotion and economic values.

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