



Challenging the African Narrative in Film: A Study of Nigeria's Nollywood

Apejaye, Esther Frank

*Department of Theatre and Media Arts, University of Calabar, Nigeria
Email: esther.apejaye@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT

The original aim of Nollywood as a film industry was to take full responsibility of the art form, art as an authentic source of popular entertainment, and a powerful medium for educating and indoctrinating the society. These positions have been vigorously articulated in the movies. However, many scholars have concentrated their critical attention on the themes and characterization of Nollywood movies but neglecting her narratives. This study, therefore examines the African film narrative using three Nollywood films as case study thereby justifying the discourse on the impoverished state of narratives in her productions. Against the background of Auteur's film theory which holds that the director's movie is a reflection of his personal creative vision, this paper uses a combination of literary, creative performance tools to examine this problem. Generalizing from these findings show that Nigerian film maker may be constructing and developing the narratives rather hastily without the requisites dramaturgical scrutiny before exhibition thereby creating the wrong impression about Nollywood products. While this draws attention of film makers to their narratives; it's hoped it will further inspire the Film Censorship Board to taking appropriate steps to improve the quality of films produced in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

To a very large extent mass media has the capacity of influencing any society, positively or negatively. Events are captured daily via mass media to the receivers, these are messages that have the capacity of educating, informing as well as entertaining its viewers or listeners. In the past, mass media characterized of either a town crier going round a community to send information by word of mouth as well as storytelling from the community's

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storyteller but today things have changed rapidly, as messages or information could be disseminated in splits of seconds to people all over the world through modern technology. It is important to note that while these stories are being told listeners draw important lessons from them because the narrators spent quality time in cooking up the story or doing adequate findings as to the origin of the story, which gives credence to their work.

Haste is one of the characteristics of man today, the average man lacks the virtue of patience, perseverance and steadfastness towards his course in life, and he is more interested in the output not the input which makes this African proverb relevant "*nobody wants to die, but everyone wants to make heaven*". The question is how can you make heaven without dying? The same haste has extended itself to most part of man's endeavour, but for this discourse we will be looking at the issues of narrative in Nollywood movies, which boils down to little or no research at all in the part of film producers. These, therefore leads us to film history in Nigeria.

Film History in Nigeria

Film was birthed by Cinema in Nigeria when Herbert Macaulay introduced cinema to Nigeria in the year 1903 as he invited Cinema came into Nigeria in 1903 the Balboa productions; they featured their film at the Glover memorial hall, in Lagos. This was an exciting experience which made the importation of films to begin. With the influx of foreign films, this began to affect Nigerians to begin to act like the West while neglecting their culture; according to Adesanya (1997:14) this made Nigerians to awake as it gave rise to intellectual movement initiated by the handful of writers, realizing that if the trend of foreign films is not executed it will infiltrate our custom and tradition, therefore intellectuals and performers came together to produce feature films. The first Nigerian films were made by film makers like Ola Balogun and Hubert Ogunde. Adesanya adds that, the economics of celluloid film production marketing had been the bane of Nigerian films makers. Since the commencement of commercial film production in the country, and prior to the establishment of the Nigerian film cooperation and sound dubbing studio facilities, production and post-production overheads had to be paid for in British, pound, sterling or US dollars. The resultant effects were two-fold; and inflated budget and a drain on the country's external reserves. The burden was further increased by the unsympathetic entertainment tax collected on indigenous films and the lack of native or resident distributors with the financial cloud to purchase the theatrical release rights of these feature film, and the lack naïve or resident distributors with the financial doubt to purchase the theatrical release rights of these feature films.

Due to the influx of foreign films as stated above many Africans were borrowing the white man's way of life while they(the West) showed Africans in the light of uneducated, primitive and good for nothing buffoons. Hubert Ogunde was one of those film producers who never supported this and so

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through his films and plays which upheld tenaciously the African culture, he had this to say about film and culture;

In films and plays foreigners depict Africans as buffoons and social degenerates who have no culture, music, dance and way of life, but are mere loyal imitators of their masters. Africans shall be most guilty, if they fail to prove to the world by practical demonstrations, that their detractors have been guilty of gross misinterpretation by preventing on our own stage and if possible on theirs too African culture and way of life and those melodies and graceful dances that are purely African origin. *Hubert Ogunde sketch April 8, 1990*

His style of production which was purely African traditional style attest to the above claim, his performance starts with an opening glee of dance and after that *Ijuba* (praise chant) then the play comes in after which there is another closing glee. He truly promoted the African traditional culture with his rich costumes, musical instruments, dance and language. The language of Ogunde's plays, song and production remained mainly Yoruba. His themes ranged from societal, political even to domestic. Ezeani commenting on his choice of theme states that;

Thematically, Ogunde diversified his concern stating act with theme from the bible, his productions focuses on the political, society and economic areas of life in his society. He also attended to the light hearted and as he advanced in age he delved more into themes of deeper inclinations, imbued with awesome production that touches most of his audience some did not believe was impossible without recourse to supernatural assistance...
(*Ezeani, Daily Champion, Monday April 9, 1990*).

Some of his films like *Aiye* (1980) meaning "world" *Jayesini* (1981) meaning "give the world some respite", and *Aropin Yenja* (1982) "it is human to conclude" and *Ayanmo* (1986) meaning "Resting" which have adopted the metaphysical form of magical fantasy have been criticized for its "escapism" by socialists. Some Christians feel it tend to be too suspicious and satanic. Because they were highly mystical, some believe that he was a cultist, rebuffing this rumour, after his death, his daughter, Mrs. Tokunbo Jegede in *National Concord Newspaper Of April, 1990*, said "*my father was not a member of the secret cult*", explaining that all the fighting films he produced were out to expose the secrets of wizards and witches. On the other hand, some critics have expressed the views that his concentrations on the supernatural tended to reinforce the average Nigerian's belief in the existence of unseen forces, especially evil forces. Awotosin elucidates further that;

Ogunde's plays and films do not portray the existence of good and evil forces just to titillate the senses. They portray life as a

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perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil in which the forces of good always triumph in the end. The word of each story is simple; evil men should turn away from their evil deeds, upright people who are being persecuted should persevere.
(*Sunday Vanguard, April 22, 1990*)

Many of the individuals who shifted their interest to feature film making were those involved in the Yoruba travelling theatre. As reintegrated by Elo, he notes that prior to the advent of Nigerian films, the nations had divided it into three sections as we had the Yoruba film, Hausa film and the Ibo film. The Yoruba film however evolved from the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition with the likes of Baba Sala (Moses Olaya Adejumo) and Hubert Ogunde. Moreover, the terms for different films could be produced by anyone even as we see Ola Balogun who produced *Amadi* an Ibo film.

How Nollywood Emerged

Nigeria film making history has a humble beginning which started with Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992). The cinema in Nigeria often referred to as Nollywood, is the Nigerian film industry which grew quickly in the 1990's and 2000's to become the second largest film industry in the world in number of film production annually, placing it ahead of the United States and behind only Indian cinema. From a recent development, Nigerian film industry is worth 853.9 billion Naira as at 2014 and produces hundreds of home videos and films per annum. It is considered the largest movie industry in terms of value and the number of films produced yearly. However, the rise of affordable digital filming and editing technologies has stimulated the country's film and video industry (Source: en.wikipedia.org/./Cinema_of_Nigeria).

Elo Ibagere(2007-2008:), notes that the Nigerian film has gone through different phases of development. The most significant of these developmental epochs has been the transition from cinema to video. Movies emerged due to lack of finances and debts from the producers of feature films this brought about the videos (Adesanya 1997:15). This has resulted in video production explosion that now makes the Nigerian film industry the third largest in the world. Nollywood movies is said to be the third largest in the world. This is as a result of the number of films churned into the market daily. To a large degree, it could be the third largest in movie production certainly not in terms of quality of the narratives. Nigerian films industry has grown from one stage to another with themes varying from ritual, love, romance, gender issues, domestic, political, insecurity and at present insurgency. Most film scholars have noted that most of the films and the themes produced by Nollywood does not portray the nation in good light from the foreign scene. It is important to add here that right from the emergence of video film almost every one trading on electronic equipment concentrate their energy into film

making. In the course of this research, the researcher visited Idumota market in Lagos state where some of these movies are produced and marketed, it was obvious that almost every film marketer is a producer of movies. With such development, it can be difficult to fully draw out the real number of films produced yearly in Nigeria. It is obvious that these movies are produced by people who lack passion for their “chosen career”. They only do it as a means of survival which would make them produce just anything to make money. Some of the films are meaningless and add no flavour to the viewers. Theatre critics would always observe that stage or screen production must add value to the audience, they should not just watch to be amused but critically watch to have a balanced judgment of the work.

Nigerian film industry is doing her best by producing so many films yet very few meaningful movies that are capable of reaching the standard of the international market; it is not enough to make movies but enough to take the necessary steps to producing movies, worthy of acceptance. Every man on the street is a potential actor to the average Nigerian film director and producer. Every electronic dealer is a potential film producer and anyone behind the camera can perform the functions of a director as far as Nollywood is concerned. Here is the problem with Nollywood; unskilled labour (Craftsmanship), with the sole aim of making profit. Nollywood as a name came up by the imitation of Hollywood, N in place of H meaning Nigeria. Hollywood is located in Los Angeles but I fought so hard to get the location of Nollywood in Nigeria but found none, I was just assured that Nollywood is everywhere, it can be found in any film making company. Tell me, in a situation where there is no location for a film industry, what do you expect? Anyone can become a registered, member of Nollywood by simply producing anything. Adesanya, 1997:16, notes that due to the emergence of video films the feat the feature film makers could not achieve in two decades of indigenous film marketing, the videographer accomplished with much ease and in a jiffy, to the chagrin of film producers.

The best film excites hearts and minds because only good art can. In Auteur's theory, it holds that the director's movie is as a result of his personal creative vision therefore in making films, the director must understand that his product speak with his own voice and identity, therefore it must engage his head, hands, heart to make it what it ought to be (Rabiger M., 2008, pg. 2). To him, low cost shooting has presented a fully professional shooting experience. The movie director can now experiment improvise, solve problems collaborate with cast and crew, revise earlier solutions and treat crises as disguised opportunities. To this end, he adds that the guerrilla “approach” empowers the low cost independent director to produce cutting edge creativity (Pg. viii). He compares a director to a conductor of an orchestra stating that such conductor first learns an instrument, master music and then learn to conduct which means coordinating an ensemble of top-notch musicians. This can be applied to the director, before he ever thinks of directing a movie, he must first get himself into the rudiment of making a

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good movie (pg.3). The director must be inventive and tenacious, getting the best out a team, having strong ideas about the human condition and a mountaineer passion for film making. A director answers to the producer and is responsible for the details, quality and meaning of the final film. This requires writing or working with writers, envisioning the films scope, purpose, identity and meaning;

Ideally, a director is broadly knowledgeable in the arts, possessed of a highly enquiring mind (pg4-11) like in the Western part (Hollywood), the film industry only accepts recruits who have undertaken a training from film scholars and these must be more ambitious, educated, versatile and knowledgeable about the cinema film than any other. The contrast is the case with Nollywood, what directors really do is to learn a little about equipment and techniques. To him tools are just tools whereas the cinema lifeblood comes from human feeling and intelligence in other words, not just learning the usage of the tools but the ability to seek for more knowledge on how to sell yourself (you work).

Rabiger M.(pg. 12), notes that to direct intelligently as a film director, you must have the following requirement;

- A knowledge and love of film language and film industry.
- A strong grasp of what drama is and how is use it
- A drive to tell stories that come from passionately held ideas about the human condition.

The question these poses to us is how many of Nollywood directors have this intelligence or quality, few. Because the alarming rate of half-baked productions are nothing is write home about, as we progress in this paper we will see some movies that elucidates the poor issues with Nigerian films and her narrative. Rabiger also has this to say about half-baked movies:

“Most independent features are unwatchable and never find a distributor. They suffer from poor writing, poor dramatic structure, poor acting, poor directing and they sink without a trace”.(Rabiger,M. 2008;14)

How many of Nigerian movies produced in 2013 are still wanted in the market? Poor narratives increase the number of films in the market because if films are well censored not all films will be distributed which would have reduced the rate of ill narratives in movies. Research has shown that less than **10%** of movies produced by Nollywood each year is remembered or wanted the following year because of it large number and repetitive yet poor narrative. Themes in Nollywood films are repeated, yes, there is nothing that will be put on video that has never happened before, but it will have more flavour if it is presented well.

Challenging the Status Quo

Here we will be dealing with the issues of narratives(a story or account of crafts/experience) in Nollywood as we will be using two movies *Pains of an orphan(1&2)* and *Thief in the Palace(1&2)*. These films are carefully selected from Nollywood English movie, it is limited to these for the purpose of this research. As earlier stated, narrative as a term means an account of the story. Lately, there is hardly one Nollywood movie whose narrative is well constructed, not done in haste or poorly produced, ranging from the Yoruba films to the Hausa films. One can barely pick a movie without seeing a similar one at the next store. Directors and script writers spend less time in researching issues before putting it up. It is an alarming issue that many movies produced now do not even have a script attached to it, all the producer does is tell the story and the director gathers his cast into action, tell me, why will we have good movies? The issue of making “fast money” has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nollywood film producers. Meeting a “movie director” Saaid Olaiya (real names withheld), whom also happens to be a video equipment seller/dealer at Alaba international market, Lagos, an SSCE holder with little training in video coverage, he admits that if there is enough sales he directs more than four movies in a month and it takes little or no time to find these products in the market. In such haste and inexperience, what do we expect in the movie market? Anything goes of course.

In *Pain of an Orphan(1 and 2)* as produced by Anaele Ugochukwu and directed by Mac Chidebe (Mr China) a story is reported of an orphan Rebecca who lost her father Uloko and Nweite her mother to wicked kinsmen from her father’s kindred. At first, while her mother was alive she was accused of killing her husband which led to them sending her packing from her own home to somewhere she knows nothing about, they later find themselves in an uncompleted building after a kind relative who accommodated them was asked by the Igwe (king of the land) to banish them from the village, she eventually dies of snake bite as she goes to get herbs for her son Polycarp whose legs were injured. Issues arose after the death of their mother as many other wicked kinsmen had to cover up their sins by killing each other. The children (now orphans), suffer unfairly in the hands of their mother’s kinsmen who pick them after their mother’s death. This led them into hawking several things just to save themselves from hunger. As their suffering persisted, things finally fell apart for the enemies of their parents as they confess, died and the properties of their parents were released to them.

The narrative of this movie, if it was well structured would have even made it a best seller. So many things make up a good narrative, where the story is disjointed with so many subplots that are unnecessary, it makes the work even more confusing for the audience though many laymen enjoy any or every movie as long as it has ‘aesthetics’ and story line that suits it viewers. Another issue with this movie is the length; the movie is more like a

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trilogy with disjointed relations. It is gathered that the first “book” of this movie is *Rebecca the Orphan* by the same producer and director. The question here is what stops them from bringing the stories together and making them one of a kind? It is obvious that most Nollywood producers/directors have run short of stories, but because they must make some money, the only story they have maybe divided into parts with disjointed plot which makes the whole thing cumbersome. Characters make up a good story, but the characters in this movie could not even make the movie what it should be. A character tells the story but when the character has a fault in his delivery of lines, then there is a problem. The only character in the play who met some percentage of the definition of acting (doing on stage/screen what others do in real life), was the character called Rebecca, one of the orphans. This was the only actor, who did forty five percent “justice” to the work as an actor but the others were a bunch of unskilled craftsmen with little or no knowledge of the art; this is a repeated occurrence in the industry. Moreover, the movie was just too false to be true, how? You may ask. Where did the snake rise up from to bite Nweite? The aesthetics, the effects were poor. Some of the producers who make these movies do it as if they are producing for people without ‘brains’. Presently over 65 % of Nigerian youths watch foreign movies instead of the Nollywood’s because of their narrative, it is true to life. Our movies portray the nation and indeed the entire continent in the light of darkness, wickedness and barbarism these ought not to be, the Hollywood movies we run to is good with it narrative not because they are no flaws but because they hide some of the problems of the American society while showing the best of it.

Thief in the Palace (1&2) is yet another movie, whose narrative is nothing to write home about. First of all, the titles of Nollywood movie tells even the lamest of men what the film is all about. *Thief in the Palace* as the name implies has to do with a thief in the palace. This is a story of a young woman named Vikki, she lived in the palace and was given the preferred treatment of a princess though she was not. She delights in stealing and telling lies at random. Due to this attitude she was sent out of the palace where she later got involved with a man called Alhaji Abdul, who takes her to America, where she prostitutes herself for money, she becomes more fraudulent and decides to marry another Nigerian over there, who she never loved but he was a major requirement for her continuous stay in America since he has a green card as her visa had expired. She involved herself in more fraudulent activities with some of the citizens as she deceived and stole so much from them, thereafter she was declared wanted. This makes her run away from the United States back to Nigeria to meet her biological parents (poor, yet polygamous home). Here she deceives her father into believing that she is a trained medical doctor from one of the universities abroad, everyone believes her even the king of the town promises to give her a chieftaincy title if only she awards him a doctoral degree, this she agrees to. Not too long the ‘short arm’ of the law catches up with her and she was

incarcerated, the law took over all her belongings and all that concerns her. Her real identity was revealed (a fraud, liar, illiterate etc). Her father who could not believe what his daughter had done, dies out of shock. Before now, her younger brother Obinna was caught in the same web as his sister, as he leaves the shores of his country to Canada illegally, were he suffers all form of ill treatment, all his belongings carted away while he is repatriated back to Nigeria without a penny, only to meet his parents without even a gift of any kind. As the play concludes we see Vikki after been released from the prison, begging her friend Grace to give her life a meaning once again.

Yet again, it takes a very patient viewer to sit back and watch a movie of this kind whose narrative is so poor and everything is done in a hurry. The whole movie if well written and organised can be captured in just one movie without a part two. The actors used here are clearly untrained asides two of them (Vikki and her Father). The director deep down in his heart will admit that he never gave his best which also depicts the issue of fast money and fame which characterises the Nigerian movie industry. It will interest you to know that we were never shown when Vikki went overseas, married an Alhaji or indulged in all those fraudulent activities, we were just told. The story line is poor and not challenging at all. The scene where Obinna goes to Canada is mechanical as the producers could not get the Canadian environmental tone needed to buttress their point. It would have been of great advantage to the work if they only make the viewers hear that he has been to Canada.

From all these movies, it becomes a clear fact that the issue of narrative is alarming in the film industry. If this is not watched, it will rather degrade the noble profession of film making in Nigeria. The narrative is the life blood of any film, once the narrative is good and has a great team of actors to make the whole idea of it materialise, one can be sure of having a great movie. Summarily, Nigerian movie makers, producers and directors have a great need for proper training in the field of film making.

CONCLUSION

It is one thing to write a story and another thing to make it sellable/ marketable. The issue of narrative if conquered early, can make the Nigerian film industry the best of its kind. Permit me to say here that, Nigerian artiste are born and made, with great ingenuity but they somehow lack the patience for diligence that is why we can afford to find just anything in the movie market. The quest for quick money is another thing, if only this can be curtailed Nollywood will go farther. The Nigerian film censor board should rise up to her responsibilities. Film makers must have a formal training, they must be duly registered. Films churned out should be adequately scrutinised

by the right standard for film making. Any film not up to the stipulated standard should not be allowed into the market. Again, any film made within a short period of time should not be regarded as releasable; additionally, film makers and directors should be given a specific number of film to be produced yearly. Any film maker, producer and director who violate this law should be adequately prosecuted.

Conclusively, Nollywood movie makers should learn to first become protégées to well experienced and world class movie makers before venturing into the art. No one can become a master of his own without first standing in the shoulders of those that have gone before.

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