

Video and Literacy: The Nigerian Experience

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Introduction

On September 7, 2001, as the world observed the International Literacy Day, the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared that there were about one billion non-literate adults in the world, Ninety-eight percent of these lived in developing nations and the rate of literacy in Africa was below sixty percent. The situation has not improved significantly since this assertion was made. As the world progresses through the twenty-first century, the literacy level and language proficiency in developed nations have continued to soar while those of Africa are still relatively abysmal. In most African countries, literacy is largely targeted at inculcating and enhancing reading and writing skills in non-literate individuals. Yet if literacy is merely the acquisition of cognitive skills, then its impact on the intellectual powers of the individuals and societies will not only be banal but transient. In effect such individuals and societies will be linguistically literate but intellectually, ideologically and critically incompetent and illiterate.

Too often, inaccessibility to educational instruction in third world countries compounds their complex linguistic profile, which has affinity with literacy. While most Africans think and communicate with their primary languages (mother tongue) than with their official colonial languages, instructional educations in mother tongue has not been conscientiously encouraged particularly with the use of instructional tools. However, in recent years the video technology has become a more popular and more preferable educational tool to the television set, because it is more pliable and more selective in stimulating conversation on a wide variety of ideas as well as helping to develop critical evaluation skills. This article therefore appraises the attempt of using the video format to

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develop the nation's indigenous languages for use in out-of-school literacy in Nigeria. In particular, it examines the genre's application in positively transforming the nation through intellectual, ideological and critical literacy.

Conceptualization of Literacy and Language

The popularly cited UNESCO (1990) definition of literacy is the ability of an individual to read and write as well as comprehend elementary sentences in his daily life. In essence, this concept perceives literacy as a simple, learned cognitive skill. Obviously the acquisition of this skill is able to place one in a position of high reputation and, perhaps, opulence, but this "autonomous literacy" as it is referred to by Brian Street (1985) needs to be enhanced in order to articulate the skill within socio-political context. G. Adeoti aptly captures the state of affairs:

Literacy sharpens the discriminating capacities of man and this is brought to bear on the processes of democratic participation and choice. It empowers the citizen to understand the condition of his being, question it and seek to change it when necessary. It is, therefore, a potential check against tyranny and underdevelopment. (Adeoti 2002:55)

These observations ostensibly obliterate the perceived pedestrian connotation of literacy particularly amongst some educators who often do not see beyond their pedantic stance. Research works and theoretical developments in recent times implicate larger issues such as discussions of socio-political ethics, the nature of economic development and communication process in any fruitful analysis of literacy as a concept.

Consequently, educators and policy formulators are beginning to turn their attention toward how literacy can civilize the society and make it technologically viable through the intellectual transformation of its citizens. This development vindicates the position of theorists like Jack Goody (1977, 1986) who had earlier postulated in his two books, that literacy is a fundamental decisive factor in realizing technological advancement. With literacy, an individual is equipped with the cognitive and intellectual wherewithal to objectively identify, assess and react to socio-economic challenges confronting him. Thus, rather than resigning himself to fate, he is able to effectively affect his general well-being and take political action which can help in reshaping his world. This empowering role of literacy invests in a man a sense of critical judgment, which helps liberate him from parochialism, sentimentality, self-pity and self-effacement. Following from his intellectual emancipation, a liberated man acquires some measure of confidence arising from his competence and ability to successfully execute tasks assigned to him. Thus, literacy is a potent tool for personal development within the ambience of the workplace.

From the foregoing, it is glaring that our understanding and usage of literacy as a concept permeates every stratum of human endeavor and social ethics. Literacy, therefore, plays a vital role in defining the development of the individual right from childhood to adulthood. A child's movement into literacy is not usually without his first attempts at reading and writing as well as his oral language development, which is determined by his listening and speaking skills otherwise known as oracy. It is observed that most children learn to listen and speak before they learn to read and write. In a typical African society, the mother tongue, rather than official national language is what the child learns first as this is the language widely and popularly spoken by many, especially at home and in formal gathering. Thus, a child speaks in his mother tongue before he learns to write and speak in his county's official language.

It is also important to note that most people who speak in their primary languages find it difficult to read and write intelligibly in such languages. Instead, they read and write better in the official language. An example can be found in southwest Nigeria where Yoruba language is the popular prevalent mother tongue. A lot of those who speak Yoruba cannot write or read Yoruba very well while they feel more comfortable reading and writing in English language, which is the country's official language. The major reason for this is that the mother tongue is often learnt informally particularly within the home setting to communicate and also as a vehicle for social and ethnic pride and identification. Its main objective is to enrich a common worldview and promote linguistic homogeneity. On the other hand, skills acquired in the official language are usually within a formal setting basically for the purpose of being able to communicate with a greater number of people beyond one's ethnic confines. Although in doing this it is also possible for us to share our needs, thoughts, feelings, aspirations and anything that makes us humans with the larger society.

However, anyone who is proficient in his/her primary language must have been able to bring some other non-linguistic factors to bear on the usage of the language. In other words, s/he does not only know the lexical structure of the language he also understands the cultural values of the language. S/he knows the rules of the language and the social contexts of its usage. Therefore, it is important to know how a language relates with the people who use it for us to have an insight into the workings of the society in order to imbibe and sustain the spirit of what Simon has described as linguistic discipline (Simon 1989:19-32). When one is linguistically disciplined s/he is able to use a language correctly and appropriately and also be conscious of the interlocutors. Our underlying inner awareness of those who take part in conversations with us cautions us to behave rationally. Besides, it helps promote and extend dialogue, eliminates feelings of embarrassment or inhibition, engenders competence in thinking and eventually as Langer has rightly observed, it helps generate new ideas (Langer 1989:397). Consequently, the job lies with language instructors to constantly impress in the mind of the learner the right forms, which will continually strengthen the inevitable link between language and its accruing culture. This is one viable means of developing and sustaining a linguistically literate society.

Video Interventions

The burgeoning video industry now thriving in some African countries is a product of economic exigencies. The dwindling financial resources and eventual collapse in the economy of some African nations, especially Nigeria and Ghana in the late seventies and early eighties made it practically difficult for the production and patronage of the celluloid format which is far more expensive than the video as a means of telling stories. Apart from its low budget, the popularity of the video movie in these former British colonies can be traced to a number of socio-cultural factors. The movies address the local audiences with motifs that reflect local interests. The themes include witchcraft, prostitution, political corruption, secret cultism, religious fundamentalism, violence, family values and integrity and tradition versus modernity.

Furthermore, the video films are readily accessible to the masses to purchase and watch in the comfort of their homes. Mass marketing techniques are adopted and the movies are marketed directly to the viewers, most of who have video tape players and compact disc players at home. This direct access has helped to eliminate the fear of insecurity associated with going to watch movies in theatres located in the cities. The poorer patrons of the video industry watch movies in video halls fitted with video projectors and large screens or "video parlors" (as they are called in Ghana) equipped with video cassette players or videodisk players. While exhibiting the cultural nuances of the people, this popular art also helps transmit and reinforce the people's beliefs and priorities as a response to the invasion of Western pop culture. Most importantly, to maintain the socio-linguistic flavor of the societies that promote the video films, several of them are produced in local languages especially Yoruba and Igbo widely spoken in Nigeria's southwest and southeast respectively. The indigenous language helps the audience to identify with the movie's cultural milieu.

It is worth reiterating that the art of story telling with video camera is amenable to targets of literacy and language development as exemplified in the indigenous cultural narratives used in producing African video movies. We shall examine in due course, the literacy concerns evident in the themes, language and cinematic techniques of two Nigerian video movies of high artistic and technical standards to illustrate this assertion. But first, to gain insight into how movies communicate meaning, we need some basic knowledge of video literacy and semiology; the study of systems of signs can help in this wise.

Much of movie's meaning is derived not from what we see but from what we do not see. This is why Metz, the famous film semiologist asserts that: "It is not because the cinema is language that it can tell such fine stories, but rather it has become language because it has told such fine stories" (Metz 1974:47). Thus, in essence, the attraction of movies lie not so much in the drama, but in how it has been shot and presented. Consequently editing and montage are cinematic devices used to communicate with the viewer. This view is reminiscent of the present writer's aesthetic perception of the montage

shots in the movie, *Dinner with the Devil*. In this movie, this writer is concerned with the judicious editing employed to juxtapose the lovemaking scene with the vibrating automobile engine gear lever to paint a beautiful picture of the male phallus in the act of lovemaking. Therefore, part of the language of film is its connotative ability that we must be conscious of, in order to understand how movies convey meaning (Adeyemi 1998:37).

Thunderbolt is a video drama production of Tunde Kelani, one of Nigeria's most prolific and internationally – acclaimed cinematographers. It is about the romance between Yinka, a Yoruba boy and Ngozi, a lady of Igbo parentage. They meet and fall in love during their social call-up known as the National Youth Service Corps. While Yinka is already working as an engineer in the city, Ngozi is yet to finish her service in a village school. Their different cultural backgrounds, the distance between the city and the village as well as the recently inherited wealth by Ngozi fuel the rumours that she is involved in an extramarital affair.

As events unfold, we learn that the jealous and vengeful Yinka has placed the curse of a deadly chastity charm known as *magun* on Ngozi. *Magun* is a mysterious Yoruba charm whose curse is used to check infidelity. Any man who has sexual intercourse with a woman infected with it will die after crowing like a rooster or doing somersaults or vomiting blood, depending on the type of *magun*. However, if the infected woman does not sleep with any man within nine weeks, she will die. As the time of her death draws near Ngozi's skepticism dwindles and it dawns on her that only sexual intercourse with Dimeji, a young doctor who dotes on her can save her life. And when they finally make love, Dimeji is stricken by *magun* only to be saved by the intervention of the herbalists.

African popular folk belief in the efficacy of traditional cultic power has found expression in *Thunderbolt*. It empowers individuals to critically examine the concept of *magun* as a reality within the Yoruba worldview and embrace chastity. The arrogant and foolish rejection of traditional herbal healings by orthodox medical practitioners is also brought to the fore. Kelani wants his viewers to be sensitive to traditional medicine as alternative scientific knowledge. What *Thunderbolt* advocates is a marriage between the two so that health care delivery can be enhanced in developing nations where sophisticated medical facilities are virtually not easily accessible.

Through the moral of the video movie as reiterated in Ngozi's speech that "there are only two tribes: good and bad people" the audience is called upon to jettison all tribal, linguistic and ethnic sentiments and adopt a humanistic approach to issues to promote unity and peace. This pluralistic view is a potential panacea for most socio-economic and religious crisis in developing nations. Although *Thunderbolt* uses the medium of English language, one way of teaching the viewers the Yoruba vocabulary is to retain the word *magun* in the movie and have the Vice Principal explain the concept. Our knowledge of this Yoruba chastity control device is to serve as a medium for interpreting the Yoruba social system.

Saworoide is another video movie by Tunde Kelani. It is a political satire on Nigerian military dictatorship. Lapite, the ruthless king of Jogbo enriches himself by eliminating

all his opponents and massively exploiting the forest reserve. He eventually enlists the support of Lagata, a retired military officer who later murders Lapite and becomes the king, ruling with all his dictatorial might. The traditional procedure for crowning a king is by-passed by Lagata and the fallout of contravening the laws of the land is that he drops dead right in front of his citizens.

Saworoide is a cinematic parable that dwells richly on Yoruba culture and tradition of singing, dancing, music and poetry, which are stylistically interwoven with the political metaphor in the movie. For instance, the lyrics of the songs reveal the constraints and plethora of existing political cultures in most African countries where tyranny, repression and intimidation have become the order of the day. The viewer is called upon to critically reflect on what is wrong in power abuse, and military dictatorship and employs his enabling power of literacy to redefine or reconstruct the social system. Apparently, it takes an informed literate group of youths in Jogbo to challenge the corrupt, repressive and despotic rule and agitate for political change. Consequently, the movie underscores the importance of literacy in the quest for good governance.

The Yoruba lexical items, proverbs and meta-proverbs are used to enrich the viewer's vocabulary and enhance his understanding of Yoruba culture. Of particular linguistic interest is Lapite's choice of onomatopoeia such as "abatialapa, odidimode, gbagbatiésirin" to describe the obese lady in the movie. Video technology has certainly emerged as a form of popular art in Africa. It is used in stimulating literacy development through its intellectual, critical and ideological re-articulation of its socio-linguistic underpinnings.

Conclusion

We have explored how the video movie, a vibrant form of popular art and a development of literacy and creativity, has articulated its potentials as a language of instruction for intellectual, ideological and critical literacy for use in socio-linguistic situations. Notwithstanding, it is regrettable that this genre of "local address" designed in the image of the local audience for the local audience is yet to elicit the desired linguistic consciousness and literacy conscientization in the target audience. One of the reasons for this is the poor technical and artistic quality of Nigerian video movies. It is an all-comers industry where the moneybags dictate the pace, in terms of production and marketing.

Shooting is hastily done with substandard equipment. Most of the cast and crew members are amateurs. Stories are ultra-twisted. Literacy materials abound as sources for movie production but they are hardly explored. For instance, apart from classics such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Akinwumi Ishola's *O le ku*, Adebayo Faleti's *Magun* (adapted to *Thunderbolt*), D.O. Fagunwa's *Ireke Onibudo* and *Igbo Olodumare*, hundreds of other prose fictions which would have helped to enhance African language and literacy development are not given attention.

The reducing interest in reading Yoruba classics amongst the young people in Nigeria may not be unconnected with their recent shift of interest to film watching. This is, perhaps, due to what Monaco calls the pictorial possibilities of film as against the linguistic narration of the novel (Monaco 1981:27). Film arouses more interest, provides a clearer picture, enhances understanding and assists memory. Thus, it is exigent to make popular Yoruba novels into movies. This may encourage some viewers to go back and read such novels thereby enhancing literacy.

Considering the relevance and importance of developing the child's literacy and language skills in order to develop the future of the individual and society, children's video movies produced in Nigeria for Nigerian children are virtually non-existent. What Nigerian children are loosing with the absence of appropriate video literacy are numerous. First, it could stimulate meaningful conversations between the children and adults on varied concepts to engender curiosity and awareness. Again, it could assist the child in developing critical evaluation skills around the quality of acting, storyline and the entire picture and sound quality. Besides, video films could expose children to other cultures and languages and teach them morals.

With greater acknowledgement and glorification of cultural differences in Africa, collaboration efforts in movie production across ethnic and national borders will encourage bilingualism and, perhaps, initiate linguistic syncretism to foster common worldview and identification. Borrowing from the vocabulary of each language will assist the child in breaking cross-border communication barriers. The existing practice in the video industry whereby some Igbo artists who speak Yoruba cross over to act in Yoruba movies is a welcome development that can help Nigerian languages and the video industry grow hand in hand.

If effectively translated into another African language, a movie is capable of stirring and sustaining interest among the people whose language, it has been translated into. In this context, video movie will be seen as a communal art, which stimulates the habit of co-operation. Lastly, there is no doubt that government attitude to video movie production in Nigeria needs to be re-examined. Considering the fact that the industry is market-driven and government financial involvement is non-existent it is still possible for some quality control to emanate from the regulatory body, National Film and Video Censor Board (N.F.C.B). The board is more concerned with registering and licensing exhibitors, distributors, producers as well as the films rather than ensuring that the films meet international technical and artistic standards. For instance, the board seldom insists on the correction of the grammatical errors in the video sub-titles. A child watching any of these movies with wrong grammar in subtitles is likely to learn the wrong language and accept it as the right.

With considerable interest in, and conscientious effort at capitalizing on the varied technical and artistic potentials of the movie, Nigerian government and video movie makers will be more sensitive to its literacy value as well as ideals expressed through the socio-linguistic contexts of the movies. The resultant awareness will surely and positively

influence literacy and language development in Nigeria.

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