

SOWING FOR THE REAPERS: THE IGBO, THE NIGERIAN PROJECT AND NOLLYWOOD HARVESTS

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Abstract

Nigerian film industry dominated by Nollywood films is a major employer of labour and foreign exchange earner in Nigeria. Historical review and developmental trends of Nollywood reveal the Igbo nation as a major contributor and sowers of the seminal seeds of Nollywood being harvested at present by the nation and her citizenry. However, the problem of this study is that today, like most Nigerian projects; the Sowers (the Igbo) are few among the reapers of Nollywood harvests. Unfortunately, this *monkey dey work, baboon dey chop* trend appears to cut across some other sectors of the Nigerian economy where some people toil and others enjoy. The aim of this study is to assess the contributions of the Igbo to the Nollywood industry as a major aspect of the Nigerian project and evaluate how the Igbo nation and other Nigerians are benefiting from it presently. The main objectives of the study include to ascertain why the Igbo is now at the periphery of the Nigerian project and conspicuously missing among the reapers of the harvests of the Nigerian project, despite immense contributions made to this project by the unfortunate Igbo race. The study therefore reviewed the evolution of Nollywood industry and the contributions of the Igbo as well as the consequent displacement of the Igbo by later entrants/reapers. Qualitative research method was adopted; while the findings concluded that the Igbo contributed a lot to the Nigerian project but unfortunately they have been displaced by other nationalities with unhindered access to government hence they now reap where they did not sow.

Introduction

The Igbo nation is one of the major ethnic nationalities that make up the Nigerian nation-state regarded as a project in this study. The Nigerian project was first of all a colonial contraption because it was mid-wifed by a colonist who amalgamated the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 and called it Nigeria. The historical beginning of the Nigerian nation is intertwined with colonial incursion into Africa. The portion of West

Africa being referred today as Nigeria is the natural home of some two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic nationalities like: the Edo, Efik, Fulani, Hausa, Ibibio, Igala, Igbo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Kalabari, Kanu, Nupe, Tiv, Yoruba, and others too numerous to mention in this paper (Nwosu, "The National Question..." 88).

The Nigerian project cannot be discussed without mentioning the name Lord Lugard who played a major role in the evolution of the nation called Nigeria today. Whether, Lugard's motivation was his love for these black nations or personal ego rooted in his ambition to rule over a large colonial territory, the fact that the amalgamated territories have vast resources that were of paramount economic interest to the colonist was not out of place. Moreover the revelation that the southern protectorate is more daring and could be slowed down by the Northern protectorate if the North is made to Lord it over them was also another factor. That the North "co-operated" easily with the colonist than the South was yet another factor. Therefore putting together all these factors, one may conclude that Lugard was motivated more by colonial economic interest; political speculations of an astute colonial administrator who could easily predict the future of Africa, especially Nigeria than by altruism and love for the territory he was lumping together.

However, what started as evangelisation of Africa and establishment of trade links culminated in a conquest. By 1914, the Southern and Northern protectorates were amalgamated and named Nigeria. The British government established indirect rule and administered the country with colonial officers through the local warrant chiefs (Nwosu, "The National Question..." 88). Notwithstanding that Nigerian was a colonial conception, after a hundred years or more, the nation cannot continue to be a colonial project because at the attainment of independence the new Nigerian nation state automatically became a Nigerian project. Consequently, the study assesses the contributions of the Igbo to the Nigerian project and the place of the Igbo in harvesting the proceeds of the Nigerian project. The Igbo nation is among the big three, - the three major ethnic groups that dominate Nigerian politics that is Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo tribes. Canice Nwosu, Emeka Nwosu and Columba Ape state that; "... the traditional Igbo man like any other primordial man in most geographical enclaves of the world found himself in a hostile but nebulous environment, where he wrestled with the vicissitudes of life (111). Therefore, they conclude that, "the theory of the origin and evolution of Igbo nation is not completely divorced from Marx and Engel's widely accepted "theory of historical forms of peoples' community by concrete material reasons" (111).

Following Marx and Engels, one may argue that material tendency extended in survivalist tendency led the Igbo to occupy the present Igboland. "Hence, the Igbo nation gradually evolved from the zeal to live a settled life and cultivate the soil around presumed fertile and conducive geographical areas" (Nwosu, Nwosu & Ape 111). Regarding the location of the Igbo in Nigeria, G. E. K. Ofomata states that:

The land surface of Igboland lies between Latitudes 4 '15' and 7 '05' North and Longitudes 6 '00' and B '30' East. It covers a total surface area approximately 41,000 square kilometres. It has a total population of 3,818,208 (1963 census

figures) and a population density of 215 persons per square kilometre. Administratively it is made up of the entire Omambala (Anambra), Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states, parts of Delta and Rivers States (1).

However, recent studies submit that, “the population of Anambra State alone by the 2006 disputed census was over 4million. The whole of the Southeast had over 15million inhabitants” (Nwadiwe 516). There are many versions of occupation theory behind how the Igbo came to live in this part of the globe; some scholars say it was through migration, while others insist that, it was through creation. But then, J. O. Ijoma posits that, “theories of Igbo origins can be divided into three broad categories: Oriental, Niger/Benue, and Igbo homeland or independent origins” (40).

Despite divergent viewpoints among these three theories of Igbo origin, convergent points include that the Igbo nation was, prior to the colonial incursion, an independent and egalitarian tribe governed by the principles of equality and communalism. Igbo tradition, religion and culture are encapsulated in Igbo worldview, which Canice Nwosu says, “is one of the known worldviews in the African continent”. Nwosu further explains that, “the Igbo worldview is parallel to the worldviews of most African tribes. However, it is among the most egalitarian, responsive, dynamic and accommodating *worldviews*” (Nwosu, “Evolving a Performance...” 135).

History of the developmental trend of the Nigerian nation-state despite geographical groupings; have other groupings and classifications proposed by political and economic pundits; however, these stratifications reveal two major categories of people that must have eluded the eyes of political and economic theorisations of the stratification of the new Nigerian nation-state. These two groups that blur other boundaries also realign ethnic groups, professionals, politicians, economists and the entire Nigerian citizenry. Though, critics may query criteria, bases and empirical data that gave birth to the two groups of Nigerians (“Sowers and Reapers”) proposed by the authors, the idea stems from ideological considerations. According to Kenneth Agugoesi, ideology is a

set of conscious and unconscious ideas that constitute one’s goals, expectations and actions. An ideology is comprehensive vision, a way of looking at things (compare worldview) as in several philosophical tendencies (see political ideologies) or a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of a society to all members of this society (a “received consciousness” or product of socialisation) (166).

Thus, to the adventurous category of Nigerians there is need to see the world as a hostile and nebulous universe that requires vision, dreams and labour, to be conquered. To the second category of Nigerians, the world is a bed of roses where others sow and others reap. This ideological conception polarises the entire Nigerian people, placing the Igbo nation as the case may be on the side of the sowers and some of the other nations on the side of the reapers. Hence, it may be a set of consciousness, goals, visions of the Igbo, or the way the Igbo look at things that make them seed sowers in the Nigerian project.

Most of the other ethnic groups put together constitute the reapers of the seed sowed by the “Sowers of Seeds”. Though the seed sowers and the reapers are both components of the Nigerian nation-state; retrospectively the struggle for Nigerian independence, building of Nigerian army, most prosperous football era and development of one of Nigeria’s goldmine – Nollywood industry including saving the nation from economic recessions and political quagmires; appear to be the task of the Igbo. The problem is that many of the other ethnic groups are not usually there at the unsure beginnings or troubled periods of phenomena that mould the new Nigerian nation-state. The second problem is how much of the harvest goes to the seed sowers, during fruiting and harvesting periods.

The struggle for Nigeria’s independence and nationalistic movements were not only Igbo man’s affairs as there were other key players like Herbert Macaulay, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Mrs. Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti and others. However, the truth remains that Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was the arrow head of the nationalistic movements that galvanised political activities and constitutional conferences that eventually led to the nation’s independence. After Dr. Azikiwe must have sowed so much; the reapers took over after independence. Other events that endangered the Igbo as part of the Nigerian project are now history; today where are the Igbo? They are no longer among Nigerians who harvest the Nigerian political and economic fruits. J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu were among Nigerian army officers of Igbo extraction who toiled from the colonial army to the Nigerian army; today if you look at names that reaped the fruits of soldiering in Nigeria; Yakubu Gowon, Murtala Muhammed, Olusegun Obasanjo, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB), Sani Abacha, Abdulsalam Abubakar, T.Y. Danjuma, Shehu Musa Yar’Adua, Joe Garba, and Muhammadu Buhari. The list is endless; but Igbo names are conspicuously missing.

Nigerian football was in shambles when Air Commodore Sampson Emeka Omeruah (Rtd), a man under whose watch the nation won many laurels in sports, took over the administration of football in Nigeria in 1993; and his era became the golden era of football in Nigeria. He repositioned Nigerian football and sports and his tenure became the most prosperous and golden sports era in Nigeria. Football started yielding foreign exchange and the Harvesters displaced the Sowers and till today the glasshouse has not known peace.

The likes of Uche Chukwumerije served as Honourable Minister of Information and Culture under General Ibrahim Babangida and under the Interim National Government of Chief Ernest Shonekan when the nation was in a turmoil because of political quagmire caused by the cancellation of 12 June, 1993 elections; Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Professor Charles Chukwuma Soludo and others have been called by different administrations in Nigeria to come and rescue the nation from political quagmire, economic recession and disintegration. They laboured, sowed, carried out their assignments meritoriously and kept the nation on course. No sooner have they achieved these feats than they were displaced by the reapers.

Today, the Nigerian film industry is the pride of Nigeria, second only to Bollywood, in terms of number of films produced. Named Nollywood, a name it has come to adopt, the Nigerian film industry not only makes image for Nigeria it also

contributes immensely to foreign exchange earnings and provides employment for millions of Nigerians. According to Jonathan Haynes:

Nollywood is an example of Nigeria living up to its potential role as the leader of Africa. Along with the rise of South Africa as a media power across the continent, we're seeing, for better or for worse, the delayed emergence of what I think is and will remain a fundamental historical pattern of dominance: South Africa specialising in the things that require large, rationally-managed capital and technical formations (broadcast media, celluloid film production and distribution, and theatre ownership), while Nigeria exploits its restless imagination, cultural depth, and entrepreneurial drive through video (5).

The question to be answered again is who are the sowers and the reapers in this Nollywood farm that is perhaps being taken over as usual by opportunists. The Nollywood industry in its development and multiplication of “woods” is becoming another seed sowed by the Igbo, but harvested by those who reap where they did not sow and displace those who laboured genuinely for the success of the project. Like most Western-oriented activities and technological innovations, Africans came in contact with film through the colonial encounter when the colonist used film for political mobilisation, propaganda and evangelisation. Colonial involvement in film notwithstanding, the history of what is referred to today as Nollywood is traced to the sowing activities of the Igbo. The history of motion picture in Nigeria dates back to the earliest Nigerian films produced by Igbo film producers like Eddie Ugbomah. “Eddie’s dexterity in filmmaking was fanned by the statement made by late American actor Charlton Heston during the premiere of *Ben-Hur*, an American epic historical drama film, at the Glover Hall, Lagos” (1). According to Eddie Ugbomah:

Charlton said that it was a shame that Nigeria (in 1959) had no film industry. That challenged 18 years old Eddie Ugbomah to pitch a career in filmmaking. The desire to pioneer a film industry that will tell the Nigerian story by a Nigerian to Nigerians (1).

The desire of this Igbo man, though like a mustard seed at its seminal beginning, germinated and grew into one of the largest trees in Nigeria, called Nollywood. Consequently, Nollywood is another contribution of the Igbo to the Nigerian project, Africa at large and the whole world. Apart from the fact that Ugbomah’s pioneering role paved the way for evolution of Nollywood later, its immediate effect was the repositioning of the subjugate approach of the Colonial Film Unit (CFU). Rosaleen asserts that, there were two main approaches to production at this time, the affirmation of the culture of the colonial masters as better and the negation or mockery of the colonised culture. Films like *A New Fire Burns* and *The British Army* reflect the mighty power of the colonialists while films such as *Tarzan of the Apes* showed Africans as inferior beings that needed to be led around by imperialists (*Film in Nigeria* 1).

With the emergence of Ugbomah's films, things changed; he projected issues of national concern positively using didactic and thought provoking approaches. The seed sown by Ugbomah was watered and nurtured by another Igbo man, Kenneth Nnebue, who produced the first commercially viable Igbo video film in Nigeria, titled, *Living in Bondage*. The film was an instant success; it consolidated the achievements of the likes of Eddie Ugbomah within and outside Eastern Nigeria. The film made Nigerian motion picture industry to take a dramatic turn and Nollywood was born!

No More *Living in Bondage*

The Nigerian motion picture industry was in bondage, under the dictates of the colonial film makers until people like Eddie Ugbomah started the liberating enterprise with the production of indigenous films. Kenneth Nnebue another Igbo man with his entrepreneurial ideas and technical approach that appear to resemble the Biafran indigenous, simple, improvised but effective technology fully came to the rescue with the production of *Living in Bondage*. The production of *Living in Bondage* introduced new technological and entrepreneurial approaches into the Nigerian film industry at a time when the nation was facing a major economic recession and the government of the day had introduced structural adjustment programmes like embargo on employment, mass retrenchment of government workers and privatisation of government industries to cushion the effects of economic recession.

It is worth noting that, Nnebue's technological/artistic innovation was a child of circumstance and a response to the harsh economic policies of the government. It was a move towards self-employment and survivalist strategy for the citizenry. Nnebue's intervention not only simplified the technology of film making, it also reduced the cost of film production and made it easier for many unemployed people to enter the film industry either as producers, directors, actors, costumiers or designers. Some critics and film theorists affirm that Nnebue's creative ingenuity is a response to the structural adjustment programme in Nigeria. According to Hyginus Ekwuazi,

... the present low level of production, distribution and exhibition activities (*vis-à-vis* the optical/celluloid film) which has led to prevalence of the video film in the industry, is a direct response to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) with the inability of the Naira to compete in the international market place... (vii).

Whether Nnebue's innovation was economically motivated or influenced by the Biafran war technological culture, the truth of the matter is that the feat achieved by this great son of the Igbo opened yet another floodgate for reapers from the four corners of the Nigerian nation-state to take over the Nigerian film industry. Indeed, it is worth noting also that being nationalist in orientation, Nnebue like his Igbo brothers had produced a Yoruba language film even before the ground-breaking *Living in Bondage*.

Obviously, many factors are responsible for the growth of the motion picture industry during the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) era. This economic policy

(SAP) threw many workers out of job and many companies folded. It also led to high level of unemployment and the income level of most families became so low. The flourishing aspect of Nigerian motion picture industry that depended so much on Kenneth Nnebue's experiment became the saving grace as workers from different professions, unskilled workers, even businessmen from businesses that are not related to the theatre or film trooped into the industry, and it became a beehive of activities. Production increased while distributors extended their tentacles across the borders.

As a point of fact, there is no disputing it; the video format has kept activities in the Nigerian motion picture industry at the peak. With such an astonishing bustle and hustle, the industry is almost bursting at the seams. In video sales and rental shops across the country, the Nigerian home video is the fastest moving commodity; it costs more than even the American home video and is preferred (Ekwuazi 7). Even though the Nigerian home video improved at geometric rate in terms of quantity (the number of films produced) and distribution channels, improvement in quality remained at the level of arithmetic progression. The major factor responsible for this trend was the replacement of artistic finesse that motivated the pioneer artists who sowed the seminal seeds of Nollywood, with commercial interest and commodification. Unfortunately, the opportunistic reapers introduced strategies that truncated the intentions of the founding fathers of Nollywood; when adverts took more than half of the time allocated to the film and shot story lines are produced in five parts with "unholy" actors dominating the cast.

Consequently, rather than build and consolidate on what had been achieved, the new entrants introduced proliferation of "word". Hence, from Nollywood we have: Yollywood, Kanywood, Kallywood, Benuewood, Akwawood, Igalawood and so on. Today, given the proliferation of woods and the level of commercial interest, the harvest of Nollywood has been taken over by unscrupulous reapers and it has become, yet another contribution of the Igbo to the Nigerian nation-state where as usual, the Igbo are schemed out during the harvest period. The truth of the matter is that this has polarised the goal of Nollywood with the commercial side of the divide overshadowing the artistic cum cultural side of the polar.

Art versus Commerce in Nollywood

A major dilemma of the artist is the socio-centric pull between finesse in art and commercial interest of the artists. The Igbo pioneer film makers started the Nollywood industry with peculiar finesse and artistic quality despite the problem of funding and lean budget. There was this zeal to do things right and operate within the rules and conventions of the profession. For instance one of the Igbo pioneer film makers Eddie Ugbomah; makes films that are highly didactic, enlightening, thought provoking and most especially daring! Majority of his films like *Aba Women Riot* and *King Onyeama* were culled from real issues and events. Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* came into the Nigerian motion picture industry with a bang because of its dramatic and artistic quality. Technically, too, it is not a write off when compared to what followed immediately after its debut. Though Nnebue intruded the quick businessman's approach to film making, his *Living in Bondage*, which is "considered the inaugural Nollywood

film” (Haynes 71), met the standard of film production and was applauded by the audience (“African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradiction”).

Film critics fault Nnebue’s innovation and new approach and brand it the beginning of piracy degraded quality and poor sound. Their argument is that affordability and ownership of television, VCRs by middle class Nigerians around 1970s and 1980s facilitated and supported Nnebue’s innovation. However, a closer look at the issue reveals that the problem lies in the abuse of this technological innovation of which Nnebue is not guilty of. When the reapers entered the industry, they replaced artistic finesse and quality with commercialisation and subsequently commodification. The craze to reap profit without hard work, to come to limelight without foundation and the thirst to market what is not marketable led to proliferation of woods like Jollywood, Kaniwood, Galiwood, Benuewood, Awkawood, Caliwood, and so on. The outcome is mass production of films without quality assurance mechanism that can assess, evaluate and control quality of Nollywood film.

Consequently, the developmental trend in Nollywood, tend to tilt more towards commerce, commercial quantity than development in quality and artistic finesse. “So far attempts to link the video industry with formal sector institutions have mostly demonstrated this grassroots mercantile culture’s incompatibility with and resistance to fully capitalist structures” (Haynes 68). Ironically, still, Haynes posits that; the video films have grown into a huge phenomenon – Nigeria is now said to have the world’s second largest film industry in terms of number of films produced (behind Bollywood), and the third largest in terms of revenues (behind Hollywood and Bollywood). The videos have spread far beyond Nigeria’s borders, but are only beginning to be recognised, let alone assimilated, by the institutions of international cinema (Haynes 68).

This is, however, expected because businessmen hijacked what was started by professionals. Moreover, as at the time of its inception, available manpower was a major factor that militated against Nollywood as well as attitudinal issues which initially was against theatre practice generally. Actors and theatre workers were regarded as paupers, night crawlers, drunks and never do wells; that either cannot fit into other professions or were too rascally to settle down for meaningful business. Things changed for the better as more and more professionals joined the industry. Opinion poll changed alongside attitudinal change. Today, with the quality of professionals engaged in Nollywood, there is a reversal in the art versus commerce syndrome as art is beginning to dominate the pull.

Nollywood and Quality Control Mechanism

Generally, artistic finesse in every discipline and different endeavours of life is an essential aspect of Igbo cosmopolitan view of life. According to the Igbo, artistic finesse is expressed with the strength of one’s right arm “Ikenga” which its full meaning is “ike ngaga” – translated as the pride of the strength of my right arm. Thus, in Igbo cosmology and pantheon of gods, Ikenga is the god in charge of finesse in arts and creativity. Nwosu affirms that: “the Igbo creativity myth is one of such mythologies which posit that; the spirit of creativity among humans is inspired by Ikenga the Igbo god of creativity...”

(*Postmodernism and Paradigm Shift...* 152). The knowledge and acceptance of this artistic finesse is what guarantees a particular level of quality in any work of art including film. Ways and means of sustaining this particular level of high standard in service and production process is called quality assurance mechanism.

According to J. P. Russell, “one definition for quality control is the operational techniques and activities used to fulfil requirements for quality” (1). He goes further to explain that, “often, however, “quality assurance” and quality control are used interchangeably, referring to the actions performed to ensure the quality of a product, service or process. The most effective quality assurance mechanism is the one that is imbedded in the people’s culture, hence, it forms part of the people’s professional ethics as reflected in Igbo cosmology. Artistic finesse inspired by Ikenga is part of the Igbo quality control mechanism; it is the secret of Igbo ingenuity and marvellous sense of aesthetics. This is the major motivation that propelled Igbo pioneer film makers and made them produce high quality films before commercialisation and commodification introduced the smile-to-the-bank syndrome.

Apart from artistic finesse consciousness, quality assurance mechanism can come in form of adherence to theory which helps the practitioner to recognise and keep to certain standard. Adherence to theory and conventions contributed immensely to the high quality of early modern African plays. Unfortunately, this quality assurance mechanism of modern African theatre was not sustained in its developmental stride because of sudden spread of the smiling-to-the-bank syndrome (Nwosu, *Postmodernism and Paradigm Shift...* 125). Adherence to theory as quality assurance mechanism applies to both stage and film. The disconnect between practice and theory in Nollywood industry is a minus that has not helped the quality of some Nollywood films, especially as the industry was hijacked by business men with the sole aim of making profit. Censorship is another quality assurance mechanism which affected qualities of Nollywood films negatively and positively because some contents that are censored by the Censors Board are the ones that appeal to the taste of the popular audience.

Professionalism is another quality assurance mechanism. Since more professionals entered Nollywood, quality of Nollywood films has improved. However, this improvement is in dire need of sustenance. The trend can only be sustained if more professionals enter the film industry. Remuneration in the industry must improve, the level of dishonesty and shabby treatment given to cast and crew by producers and directors lowers the level of professionalism and should be discouraged.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the Nigerian project is a macrocosm, of projects among which the Igbo have made immense contributions. The study also affirms that Nollywood is part of the Nigerian project pioneered by notable Igbo filmmakers. It is, however, sad to observe that, today, the Ugbomahs and Nnebues have not been given their pride of place in the entertainment industry, as people who sowed and watered the seed that has today germinated and blossomed to the big business that it has become. Like the Nigerian

attitude to everything Igbo, it is not surprising that the pioneers have today been forgotten, perhaps because of their Igbo blood.

This is why the development of the Nigerian film industry which led to proliferation of “woods” failed to give any preference to the pioneers but rather placed them at disadvantaged position. Consequently mediocrity took over the industry in time of harvests and the sowers now operate at the periphery. This attitude must change if sustainable progress must be made. Hence, this displacement also affected initial goals that tilted more towards artistic finesse in the industry and cultural revival. Hence, standards fall as attention shifted to quantity of films produced and sold.

Finally, the study recommends that there is need to recognise the efforts of the Igbo pioneer filmmakers and other Igbo who contributed to the Nigerian project in other areas. There is also need to revive the initial goals of the pioneer filmmakers to sustain what Nollywood has achieved. Generally the Nigerian project should be restructured and repositioned to reflect reap as you sow and encourage healthy competition.

The Igbo too should wake up from their supposed slumber and start telling their own stories. Like Chinua Achebe had opined, *no one can tell our story better than us*. As rejected stones, we must prove to the world that we are the cornerstone of the Nigerian state. This is why efforts such as this, stand commended. The Igbo are pioneers in different sectors but more often than not, these iconoclastic strides go unrecognised. This must change.

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