

NIGERIAN'S RECESSION: THE DYNAMICS OF NOLLYWOOD'S INTERNET FILMS AND SOLOWOOD PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES

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Abstract

*The Nigerian video film industry is greatly influenced by Nigerian society. Nollywood films similarly influence the Nigerian society. The complementary role of Nollywood and its inherent Nigerian society is the thrust of this paper which interrogates the influence of Nigerian recession period on Nollywood's narrativity, production quality and exhibition medium. This will be achieved through interview sessions with selected industry practitioners as well as the review of selected literature in the subject area. The paper argues that Nigerian's recession period occasioned a boom in the internet exhibition method in Nollywood and later reinvigorated the **Solowood** production technique: a technique of multiple film shoot involving the same production apparatus. It calls for a restructuring of Nollywood through enactment of favourable government policies that will entrench best global practices and enable its products to serve as Nigeria's alternative source of major revenue.*

Introduction

Since its pivotal inception in 1992, Nollywood industry has so far grown to an enviable height with relatively meagre support from the Nigerian government. Being propelled by business men, who source production fund, embark on production, as well as, distribution of films, the economic situation of its host country Nigeria naturally affects its framework. Suffice to posit that the fate of the industry to a great extent is determined by the economic situation in Nigeria. Since the production of *Living in Bondage*, Nollywood has reacted in diverse ways to the Nigerian's economic situation. The influence of Nigerian's economic and socio political situations are not only seen in the transformation of production and distribution modes but also in the emergence of different film genres which reflects these situations. Thus, the industry has (un)consciously developed a number of genres, which reflect peculiar circumstances in Nigerian society. To understand the implications and nature of these genres, a concise geopolitical account of the Nigerian nation suffices.

Nigeria, a political construct of the 1914 Lord Lugard's amalgamation of the Northern, Western and Southern protectorates is repeatedly given to misunderstanding presumably occasioned by religious and ideological variance amongst the three major geopolitical zones. This has continually generated conflicts and threatens the existence

of the Nigerian society. These ideological variances in Nigeria are always captured in Nollywood films. Thus, through films like *Suicide Bombers*, *Subsidy Cabal*, *Tribal War*, *Ebola Virus*, *Missing School Girl*, one perceives the socio-political situation in the Nigerian society.

Citing Turner, Barclays Ayakoroma asserts that the emergence of film genre is a function of the synergy between the audience, filmmakers and film producers. He believes that, “genres constitute an integral part of a film movement in a given industry” (83). Making reference to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Ayakoroma supposes that films produced within a particular period and/nation as well as filmmakers who operate within a common production structure entrench a film movement (89). Tracing the generic developments in Nollywood, he recalls that the commercial success of Kenneth Nnebue’s *Living in Bondage* opened the flood gate to generic penchant to ritual, witchcraft and occult themes in both *Living in Bondage* and other successive films within that period (90). This ritual theme, according Femi to Shaka, replicated the heartbeat of the Nigerian nation at that time. Making a case for the socio-cultural interplay between the Nigerian society and Nollywood, Shaka recalls that the Nigerian society under the military regime at the inception period of video film met its dark ages. According to him, following the tribulation in the society, ritual killings became the order of the day in Nigeria (243). This justifies the development of the ritual genre at the inception of Nollywood.

Along with the ritual and witchcraft generic themes evolved the epic or historical generic. These types of films which attempt to reconstruct our historical past as well as our myths and legends are exemplified in films, such as, the *Battle of Musanga* (Ayakoroma 90). Sequel to the epic genre and in consonance with the societal structure, films that are replete with themes of prostitution trickled into the Nollywood screens from 1995. This genre was championed by *Glamour Girls* (Ayakoroma 90). Shaka recalls that prostitution themes found in early Nigeria films reflected the Nigerian society bedevilled with hardship where girls find prostitutions as a lee way. He observes that, the General Sani Abacha regime was marked by excessive looting of national treasure as well as mass poverty. Human rights abuses are seen in the killing of various journalists, who criticised his government. Following these, mass starvations, ritual killings, as reported in *Otokoto* in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, and other such criminal vices, were the order of the day. Consequently, many young girls migrated to Italy for prostitution. It is in the heat of this scenario that Nollywood was born (241-242).

From the generic themes of prostitution, producers veered into films that dealt with traditional beliefs. Championed by films like *Blood of the Orphan*, these productions gave way to family situation dramas, which seemingly examined particular marital and family relationships from the contemporary perspective. Chico Ejiro’s *Just a Mission* is one of such examples (Ayakoroma 91-92). Thus, in the quest to satisfy public taste, particularly the youths, the romance genre championed by films like *Romantic Attraction* emanated. Nevertheless, with filmic examples of Lancelot Imasuen’s *Issakaba*, which captures the insecurity situation in Aba in Abia State, Nigeria, between the year 1998 and 2002, and the introduction of the community vigilante group, the crime/gangsters genre evolved (Ayakoroma 92-94). It is worth noting that, the film,

Issakaba, drew its title from Bakassi, a vigilante group formed to combat criminals in Aba. In addition, Christian genres equally emerged as a generic form in Nollywood in 1999 following the presumed gullibility of Africans. Heralded by films, such as, Teco Benson's *The Price*, movies in this category succinctly treated religious themes (Ayakoroma 94). Nonetheless, genres that are replete with feminist themes as seen in Zeb Ejiro's *Mortal Inheritance* and most prolifically comedy genres as seen in Amayo Uzo Philips' *Akinokwa* equally emerged. Finally, adventure films that exhibit high energy, physical stunts, chases, battle, fights, escapes and spectacles, emerged. This genre was championed by Teco Benson's *Executive Crime* (Ayakoroma 95).

However, many genres have supposedly emerged after Ayakoroma's detailed generic studies. Since this study is not a generic study on Nollywood, it may not delve into the structure of the emergent genres. However, it is worth noting that films have always responded to circumstances and situations in Nigeria, both in generic development and the attempt to reflect the Nigerian society. For instance, the insecurity in Northern Nigeria orchestrated by Boko Haram has been mirrored in films, such as, Zack Orji's *Suicide Bombers*, a farcical film which ridicules the activities of Boko Haram Islamic terrorist sect in Nigeria. While the insecurity of Boko Haram bedevils Northern Nigeria, the activities of Niger Delta Militants, who rampage Southern Nigeria are captured in films, such as, Nwankwo Agbo's *Subsidy Cabal* and Ikenna Eniekwe's *Liquid Black Gold*. Besides, the multi-ethnic nature and tribal sentiments in Nigerian society is captured in Mac-Collins Chidebe's *Tribal War*. Furthermore, films, such as, *Missing School Girls* and *Dia ris God ooo*, though had not much related content to their titles, examine the topical issue of the kidnap of Chibok School girls, as well as, the aftermath of the kidnap, when the then first Lady of Nigeria, Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan lamented: "There is God oh", attributing the Chibok kidnap saga as phony; while *Ebola Virus* recaps the Ebola disease saga in Nigeria. These examples have gradually become leading films to various emergent film genres.

Economic Recession in Nigeria

Nigeria was declared to be technically in recession by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015. In an attempt to underscore the concept of recession and its effects on the Nollywood industry, Farayibi's definition of recession suffices. Economic recession, according to him, is the decline in the economy, often characterised by rising prices in goods and services, government's inability to meet its financial obligations, poor performance of macroeconomic variables and high exchange rate (1). Barisa Nwinee conceptualises recession as,

...being characterised by a period of negative economic growth for no more than two consecutive quarters. Rise in unemployment, fall in individual production, adjustment in real GDP for inflation decreases, stagnation or fall in incomes or fall, especially with regard to their purchasing power in wholesale and retail sale and increase in government borrowing are considered to be characteristic feature of recession (17).

Over the years, many countries have notably suffered from one form of recession or the other. Farayibi observes that the United States of America suffered economic depression in the 1930s. He equally observes that recently, there was a global financial and economic meltdown attributable to the collapse of the US sub-prime mortgage institutions (2). It is in this line that he outlines many factors that were responsible for the economic meltdown which was seemingly faced in Nigeria between 2015 and 2017. Among such factors was the eleven months delay of President Muhammadu Buhari to form a cabinet when he assumed office on 29th May, 2015. This in-action by the president apparently crippled the economy of the Nigerian nation, as politicians who were not necessarily economic experts took economic decisions, which ordinarily would have been made by the Federal Executive Council (FEC). Sequel to that is the introduction of Treasury Single Account (TSA), which though achieved its aim in curbing corrupt practices, nonetheless stifled credit creation and economic activities in the country. Furthermore, the effect of partial subsidy removal though equally achieved its intention of destroying the cabal in the petroleum industry but caused serious inflation in the prices of goods and services. Besides these factors, the delay in signing the 2016 Appropriation Bill into law is believed to have played a role in crippling the economic activities in the country. In addition, the fall in the global oil prices contributed immensely in the Nigerian's recession. Being a mono-product and dependent economy, the fall in the global oil prices caused dwindling budgetary allocation to the state from the federal government. Consequently, many states were unable to pay workers' salaries (3-7).

In view of Nigerian's recession, Nwinee categorises recession into four spectrum based on its logarithmic scale of magnitude. Thus there are minor, major, severe and ultra-types of recessions. According to him, minor recession is a mild recession, which often encapsulates the period of two or three quarters with a mean quarterly GDP decline of up to 1.5%. There is an immediate recovery of such economy and the macroeconomic indicators return to prerecession level within one or two years. On the other hand, major recession as its name portends is a key economic downturn which lasts between two to four quarters with a mean quarterly decline of between 1% and 3% in GDP growth rates. This type of recession often triggers uproar by the citizenry who often face the negative effects of this type of recession (18).

Furthermore, severe recession refers to a large-scale economic set back which typically lasts for 1-2 years with mean quarterly decline of 3% to 5% GDP growth rates. This is characterised by a fall in the living standard of the citizenry. The country's currency here is often devalued; strikes and protest are often seen in the countries with severe recession. In addition, ultra recession lasts from four to several years. The GDP growth rates decline as much as 20-25% annually. Recovery from ultra-recession lasts upwards of one decade. This type of recession is characterised by institutional crake down. Thus, industrial production and agriculture mostly fold up. There is general hunger by the population who are often faced with deprivation of educational and health services. There is high crime, and inflation rates, and most people emigrate from the country (Nwinee 19). Continuing, Nwinee gives examples of countries that have

suffered minor recession, such as, Sweden (2008), USA (1969-1970), and Japan (2001); all of which lasted for two quarters. Examples of countries with major recession experiences are France (2008-2009), Germany (2008-2009), South Korea (1998), and Japan (2008-2009). These recession periods in the countries lasted for four quarters, except for South Korea, which lasted for three quarters. In addition, recessions that occurred in Thailand (1997-1998), Argentina (2001-2002), USA (2008-2009) and Latvia (2008-2009) are examples of severe recessions that have occurred in history. However, there are no notable examples of ultra-recession (Nwinee 18-19).

Nigeria has oil as its major source of revenue; and such mono-products could either be a blessing or curse to its citizens. According to Nwinee, it is perceived as a curse, citing “resource curse theory”, which states that:

Economics with an excessive exposure to a commodity, such as oil, may become imbalanced. Just as the money from drilling for oils seen as easy and may make an economy slow to develop alternative business sectors, the simple money from trading in assets, and lending against property, may distort a developed economy (7).

Nevertheless, to assume that, the “resource curse theory” is the reason for Nigeria’s economic recession is arguable. Some scholars, such as, Farayibi have attributed many factors outlined above in this paper as responsible for the economic drain which Nigeria faced between 2015 and 2017. Nonetheless, in September 2017, Nigeria presumably moved out of recession. Citing the National Bureau of Statistics, Kieron Monks observes that,

Nigeria’s GDP expanded by 0.55% in the second quarter of 2017 year-on-year, according to National bureau of statistics, ending five consecutive quarters of contraction. Quarter-on-quarter growth for the same period was 3.23% (1).

The (in)accuracy in the National Bureau of Statistics’ supposition that Nigeria has moved out of recession is not subject of debate in this paper; rather, the paper focuses on the effects of Nigeria’s recession period on the Nollywood industry.

The Development of Nollywood’s Internet Exhibition Method

The word, ‘internet film’, is seemingly prevalent among Nollywood stakeholders (producers and its consumers). The transition story of celluloid film to video film format in Nollywood has been adequately documented by scholars, such as, Jonathan Haynes, Onookome Okome, Femi Shaka and a host of others, such that its repetition here would seem a cliché. However, by 2000, the film industry in Nigeria had faced serious marketing challenges because it was threatened by cable television networks championed by Multichoice Television Network whose activities superficially reduced Nollywood DVD patronage. It is believed that the DVD market has been further threatened with the outburst of cinema culture, championed by radical producers, who

ensured that production investments are recouped from the cinema houses before circulating the contents through the DVD markets. Thus, in desperate quest to remain in motion picture business and in conformity with the innovative spur that engineered experimentation which gave birth to the video format from celluloid film, internet film distribution channels emerged. This, of course, was novel as technological novelty via the modernisation in telecom companies enabled motion pictures to be viewed via android phones.

The proliferations of internet distribution networks was made possible by the digitisation of data based information networks and the innovation of Android phones through which viewers can screen visual images in the comfort of their homes. Thus viewers easily watch motion pictures with the aid of Global System for Mobile (GSM) communication networks, which provide platforms through which they employ the use of data to access the internet. This was made easy with the introduction of different platforms where these films are domiciled. This presupposes that the film contents are being domiciled in various internet sites, such as, *YouTube*, a general site which hosts both professional films and armature motion picture contents. Specifically, sites like Netflix, which are paid platforms showing professional Hollywood films, are accessible to teeming viewers on subscription bases. Thus, YouTube has free and unrestricted viewing channels. Since YouTube is a free channel, most amateurs and hobbyists freely watch and upload their videos; while restricted channels, such as, Netflix require subscription before one can preview any content therein. Similarly, there are other restricted YouTube platforms, such as, Amazon, Hulu, iTunes and others, which show Hollywood films.

This internet technology became prominent in Nollywood with the introduction of IrokoTv by Jason Njoku, the company's Managing Director. IrokoTv, a restricted film channe hosted by YouTube, features prominent Nollywood films online to viewers through subscription. Seeing the success made through internet sources, many marketers floated similar channels. One of such Nollywood internet channel is RealNolly, a YouTube channel flouted by a group of 10 prominent marketers. In a personal interview, the Managing Director of RealNolly, George Edmond, noted that he and his fellow marketers, such as, Chinedu Ezenwa (P. Collins), Onyeka Chukwu Okeke (Ossy Affason), Okechukwu Okonkwo (Ogeby Innovation), Uchenna Nwankwo (CWorld Movies), Amos Onwe (Danga Movies), Emeka Onwumeze (Ice Productions), Onyeka Chukwu Oraziaka (Immortal Films), Arinze Onuchukwu (Hallmark Films), Elochukwu Anigwogu (Elonel Int'l), among others, came together to form an online Nigerian film streaming platform, known as, RealNolly. Edmond observed that the company started in 2010 by uploading cluster of various films by the ten marketers (EPs), who formed the company. Somehow, IrokoTV started before RealNolly. But in acknowledging the fact that the world is technologically driven, Edmond asserted that the directors of RealNolly believe that adapting with the trends determines one's survival in the technologically driven industry. Nevertheless, he believed that with the introduction of the online platform, Nigerian film viewers in the Diaspora could now easily access their favourite films (Interview with Edmond).

From the above interview, the researchers deduce that though the DVD and VCD markets were on decline before the advent of different on-line platform, the proliferation of these platforms has so far further impoverished Nigerian DVD and VCDs markets both in Nigeria and abroad.

Nigerian's Economic Recession and its Influence in Nollywood

The effect of the economic recession on the financial returns in Nigeria's film industry is seemingly difficult to determine. This is because an average executive producer, who in Nollywood's production context is popularly known as, a marketer (*film financier*), often claims that there is no money in film production. Beyond these claims, most of them are seen to have invested in hotels and other businesses with the proceeds accrued from film production. This idea of diverting rather than investing back to the Nollywood industry is a subject that requires serious academic interrogation.

In a personal interview with Obi Okoli, a renowned film actor/director, he believes that the Nigerian recession period affected film budgets with a drastic downward review by the executive producers. Thus, artists and crew fees were drastically slashed by executive producers. He asserts that notable producers, such as, Andy Best, P. Collins, Amaco, Trust in God, B.D, and Arisco, who are known for high budget films in Nollywood, produced sparingly within the recession years. In addition, Amaco and Arisco are believed to have been shooting sparingly within this period while Trust in God and B.D. went into low budget internet film productions. While most of them are still yet to produce within these years, others went into soft pornographic internet films with incredibly low production budgets. He recalled that Andy Best who normally shoots an average of four high budget films every year, shot only one and shot about thirty internet film in the year 2016. He equally observes that before Nigerian went into recession, a group of ten marketers had floated an internet film channel known as RealNolly in the year 2010. Thus, during the recession period, many producers who could no longer afford high budget films went into low budget internet film productions, since they found ready distribution channel through the RealNolly platform (Interview with Okolo).

On his part, Larry Ebere, a budding Nollywood actor, asserts that at the inception of the recession period in Nigeria, VCD/DVD markets had seemingly crashed. Thus, following the desperate instinct of some film marketers for survival, Prime World Movies opened his personal YouTube channel, where he uploaded all his films for global viewership. With an online account, he would make money from viewers, who subscribed to his channel and watched his films. He is believed to have made a good sum of money from this arrangement. The general thinking in the industry is that, P. Collins Movies collaborated with the other marketers to establish RealNolly TV channel because they saw this huge financial returns Prime World Movies got. RealNolly channel features sub-channels, such as, Best of Patience Ozokwor, Tonto Dike, John Okafor, Peter Edochie, and Mercy Johnson movies among others (Interview with Ebere).

As earlier pointed out, the effect of recession had affected the cash flow in the film industry and many marketers resulted to internet films with the emergent soft

pornographic genre. Thus, through this channel, these soft pornographic films were uploaded onto the internet. Though the soft pornographic films were not acted by the aforementioned star actors whose names and images were used to promote these channels, the pornographic postures of the actors that featured in such films generated serious traffic in these channel as fans of these notable actors are seemingly misled to believe that the soft pornographic films were acted by the star actors. However, as the fan base of these channels expanded through the pornographic postures of the emergent soft pornographic of artists who are often used as their selling points/strategies, YouTube channel took serious frowned at it. It is believed that these pornographic channels are greatly patronised by Arab countries as a result of restrictions placed on such liberal sexual lives by their religion. Thus, such pornographic contents provided a window of sensual satisfaction of their animalistic instincts (Interview with Ebere).

As earlier stated, the multiple traffic generated by these soft pornographic channels meant so much money for both the channel managing directors as well as the content providers. While the independent producers who flooded these internet channels made deluge returns through these pornographic contents, YouTube, the host server issued serious warnings to the host channels to eschew from displaying these bizarre contents. These warnings were scarcely adhered to by most of the channel operators. Subsequently, most of these channels were shut down by YouTube. The promoters of RealNolly TV were affected a bit as some of their channels were shut down by YouTube. So, they embarked on a serious campaign to content providers to eschew pornographic scenes in the films they shoot. Subsequently, RealNolly TV started censoring film contents before uploading on their channels. Thus, RealNolly has come up with policies to curb the production of soft pornographic films and this has taken producers back to the drawing board (Interview with Ebere).

This action appears to have revamped the quality of productions as most marketers have gradually returned to shooting what is superficially seen as semi-high budget films. However, the seemingly semi-high budget films are being greatly controlled by what we refer to as, the *Solowood* technique. This technique is being championed by Solomon Apata, whose production technique is fuelled by the Nigerian recession's survival strategy vis-à-vis the collapse of soft porn channels. To firmly underscore the effects of recession on Nollywood, *Solowood* production technique suffices.

The Development of *Solowood* Production Techniques

As earlier observed, with the seeming crash of soft pornographic channels on YouTube, producers embraced relative semi-high budget film productions albeit through Solomon Apata, popularly known as Solo Amaco herein referred to as, *Solowood*. With the apparent crash of the low budget film production, Solomon Apata, the current chairman of the Association of Movie Producers (AMP), South East zone is superficially thriving in his production techniques known as, “package film production for marketers” (Interview with Okoli). Obi Okoli affirms that, Solo Apata achieves this by meeting marketers who perhaps have a budget of about three million naira for the production of a particular film. These marketers would have enlisted particular star artists they intend to

use for the film. Solo Apata would convince them (marketers) for him to produce such a film for them with the same stars at half the budgeted amount. This drastic budget reduction attracts many marketers to him and as such affords him the opportunity to handle many films (an average of six film productions from different marketers) at every point in time. In producing this number of films, which he regularly does simultaneously and in a concurrent location, he uses the same production indexes, such as, cast and crew, welfare, equipment, costumes, sets and props to achieve them. He equally achieves great price reduction through bulk negotiations with actors and crew members for this number of film productions (Interview with Okoli).

Larry Ebere, who relocated from Lagos to Asaba for the purpose of film acting, said he had done 23 films for Solomon Apata in this *solowood* marathon arrangement. He recalled that Solomon Apata was instrumental to the relocation of Nollywood production base from Enugu to Asaba. He equally observed that star actors, such as, Mercy Johnson, Mike Ezuruonye, and so many others emerged from this *Solowood* concept before the economic recession (Interview with Ebere).

It is important to note that, *Solowood's* production technique did not start as a result of the economic recession in Nigeria. Rather, the recession, which left most movie marketers nearly going bankrupt found the *Solowood* arrangement as a safe haven. Larry Ebere recalls that shortly before the economic recession, the *Solowood* arrangement with executive producers (Marketers) crashed as a result of its overbearing nature of duplication of sets, props, costumes and narrative style. However, he attributes its re-emergence to the economic recession in Nigeria, because it is the reason why some financially helpless marketers resorted to the arrangement (Interview with Ebere).

Conclusion

It is a common knowledge that Nollywood has grown through the undaunted efforts of private sector investors. However, the industry is still very fragile and flexible to the Nigerian socio-culture and economic dynamism. This flexible and unpredictable nature of the industry requires stability through strong policy formulation and implementation by the government. This is because the industry is still left in the hands of the business moguls whose major concern is profit making. Being a popular culture, the industry may always reinvent several strategies to remain afloat in business amidst troubling economic situations. However, Nollywood needs to be taken away from its one-man structure business to a corporate business nature. That way, a national film commission can be established with the focus of ensuring that the image of the country is laundered through Nollywood films.

The polarisation of the different internet distribution networks will impact negatively on Nollywood if the situation is not adequately handled. Beyond misrepresenting the Nigerian society to the outside world, its low budget nature had left most professional artistes and crew members bankrupt. This is because some of the internet film budgets fluctuated between one hundred thousand naira (₦100,000.00) and two hundred thousand naira (₦200,000.00), an amount barely enough to pay a “C” rated artist in Nollywood. However, the producers of this genre of films made millions of money while it lasted. It is therefore recommended, following Farayibi’s advice, that

there is a great need for diversification of the structural base of the nation's economy away from oil (3-7). Farayibi's suggestion of diversification in Nigeria's mono-economy structure is apt as the Nollywood industry should be adopted as an alternative avenue for revenue generation in Nigeria.

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Select Filmography

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