

NOLLYWOOD FILMS AND THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS OF ECOLOGY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria in 1956 at Oloibiri, has brought myriads of problems to the region. For decades, there have been agitations and attendant crises resulting in repeated loss of lives and properties and monumental destruction of the ecosystem. Several interventions, including from Nollywood, and countless efforts at finding a solution to the conflicts have been deployed. This paper undertakes an assessment of the progress of actionable measures taken, primarily by the government and oil companies, in curbing environmental degradation and injustices, thereby bringing the citizens' agitations to rest. It uses Nollywood films, *Blood and Oil* (2010), *Black November* (2012), *Oloibiri* (2015) as points of departure for analysis and discussion. This paper interrogates the level of changes attained, if at all, with the production of the aforementioned films. It deployed a qualitative research method, exploring document observation, media analysis and focused group discussion (FGD) instruments. The study is theoretically undergirded by the Marxist Film Theory (MFT). Findings showed that, though there have been significant changes since Nollywood's films in the crises, there is still much that needs to be done, to lay to rest the issues of agitations and climate change in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The paper submits that new interventions from Nollywood are required as events have assumed new dimensions and new dynamics have arisen.

Keywords: Agitations, Art, Film interventions, Niger Delta, Nollywood, MFT.

Introduction

Art, undoubtedly, could be said to be one of the most dynamic phenomena of society. Scholars has attempted to define art, however, the more it is defined; the more it has to be defined. Geertz opines fact that "art is notoriously hard to talk about" (94). Nascimento adds that, when made of "pigment, sound, stone," or without any clear

reference to the “figurative world,” what we named ‘art’ seems “to exist in a world of its own, beyond the reach of discourse” (19). It is not difficult to talk about art, but in everyone's eyes, “it seems unnecessary to do so” (Geertz 94). For many, according to Geertz, art “speaks, as we say, by itself: a poem must not mean but be; if you have to ask what jazz is, you will never get to know” (94). Consequently, in the words of Nascimento, “we often learn to 'feel' rather than 'think' about those thought-provoking songs, or those impressive paintings, or those films that thrill us whenever we remember them” (19).

One can afford to discuss extensively and satisfactorily the effects of art generally and film in particular, and how it affects society. In this sense, it is not out of place to register that, art influences society by changing opinions, instilling values and translating experiences across space and time. Research has shown that art affects the fundamental sense of self. Painting, sculpture, music, literature and other arts are often considered to be the repository of a society's collective memory. Art preserves what fact-based historical records cannot: how it felt to exist in a particular place at a particular time. Art in this sense is communication; it allows people from different cultures and different times to communicate with each other via images, sounds and stories. Art is often a vehicle for social change. It can give voice to the politically or socially disenfranchised. A song, film or novel can rouse emotions in those who encounter it, inspiring them to rally for change (“How Does Art Affect Culture and Society?” par.1).

Art is also communicative – it helps people from various cultures understand and communicate with each other through songs, pictures and stories. People often relate to other societies and cultures through their artistic representations (Omoera and Chukwuma 83-84). As a vehicle for social change, governments use art forms such as murals, paintings, sculptures, drama, movies and songs as propaganda material to change public opinion and launch public informational campaigns. Art is all around us. You experience art while walking through the city, listening to the radio, or driving your car. Every tangible man-made object you see or touch results from an artist's vision. Artists provide creative, intellectual and emotional insights into society at large, impacting the masses and challenging the status quo. Art helps cultures unite and boosts economic growth—helping the world become a prettier, better and happier place to live in. This is why art is known as the highlighter on the text of life (“How Does Art Affect Culture and Society?” par.3).

Films are nothing but the amalgamation of art, literature and science. While art and literature reflect the moments of life brilliantly, science studies man and his world. And since cinema is the combination of the three, it undoubtedly portrays man and his life in society (Yadav 144). Cinema, since its very beginning, has been a great medium of reflection on the socioeconomic and political changes in society. Films have an immense potential to project the images of a society in a way that conventional mediums never could. The Indian film industry is one of the largest film industries in the world exploring the images of Indian society through cinema (Yadav 141). Films have always been a mirror reflecting the actual image of our society. Cinema too is a

form of mass media that is inspired and influenced by society and quite beautifully and effectively portrays the moments of life.

Nollywood and the Struggle in the Niger Delta

Research unveils the existence of an avalanche of other critical studies that have been conducted on the Niger Delta. This is particularly true as it regards the role of film in fostering socio-political changes in society. Hence, it is necessary to review studies that have formed the fulcrum of relevant literature for the study. Fyनेface's "The Emergence of Niger Delta Agitation Films in Nollywood: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works" traces the emergence and development of the Niger Delta sub-genre films to the viewers' desire to discontinue the viewing of the usual ritual films that have become boring. Defining the concept of Niger Delta sub-genre films, Fyनेface claims that:

As a sub-genre, the Niger Delta agitation films lucidly paint a gory scenario of the lifestyle and the ecological inconveniences and devastation meted to the rich oil-rich areas of the region by the government that is backed by some elite and community heads representing the people. The films vividly portray the root causes of youth restiveness in the region. Again, the Niger Delta agitation films as a sub-genre bring to its audience the various difficulties encountered by indigenes of the Niger Delta states. (428-429)

Fyनेface proceeds to highlight several other characteristics of the identified sub-genre of Nollywood films. The study reveals that oil politics, which found its tributaries into the soil of the region in the late 1950s, was initially alien in the course of the then kings and leaders' interest in palm kernel and oil. It was after the discovery of crude in 1956 that the Niger Delta began to suffer untold hardship, first from the colonial masters and thereafter from the rulers in Nigeria. The study identifies the generic development of Nollywood, starting from the ritual genre to the emergence of new sub-genres, among other areas of interest.

Adjeketa's "The Niger Delta Crisis: Portrayal of Causes of Restiveness in Nigerian Home Video Films", undertakes a critical analysis of home videos that have been produced by filmmakers "to highlight the plight of the people of the Niger Delta as a result of oil spill, leading to militant response by the youth, having achieved little peacefully" (159) of which she states, "*Black November* is one of such films" (159). Adjeketa thus establishes the role that the film medium plays in society. He argues that like every other art form, it functions as a mirror of the society, exposing the good, bad, and ugly happenings in different strata and regions of a given country (159). Adjeketa asserts that "the failure on the part of the government to implement policies that will better the lots of youths of the region" (159) is chiefly responsible for the situation. In this connection, he acknowledges the role of home videos like *Black November* and posits that "careful analysis of the film reveals that the Niger Delta youth are agitating for freedom, from bad governance, diseases and death caused by pollution from oil spills and neglect by successive governments both at the centre and region" (Adjeketa 159). Therefore, there is a need to adopt the approach of Ebiere, which Adjeketa

describes as, “a constructed approach of dialogue and good conscience to express and communicate their grievances to the government” (159).

Anyanwu’s “*Black November: Interrogating the Niger Delta Question*” interrogates Jeta Amata’s *Black November* on the vexed issues of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. The issues border on the quest for emancipation from injustice, environmental degradation, deprivation, inhuman treatment, negligence, are at the nexus of the agitations and militancy in the region (151). But the article draws “inferences from what the movie overlooked and what it portrayed such as the failure of dialogue births violence” (151). He highlights the problems in the Niger Delta and give credence to the thematic concerns raised by the director and draws on the ethos of the Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), which sees violence as a product of frustration borne out of depriving people of their rights, denial of justice; a sense of oppression sets in that then leads to reactions that may be violent (158). Anyanwu submits that “the Niger Delta region is much misunderstood, abused and betrayed by its own people, the media, Nigerian government, oil multinationals and the world at large” (151). The misunderstanding is largely a product of media misinformation and ignorance on the part of stakeholders and that the filmmaker succeeded in getting his message across (Anyanwu 168).

Ebekue and Nwoye in “Nollywood Interventions in Niger Delta Oil Conflicts: A Study of Jeta Amata’s *Black November*” critically X-ray Nollywood’s contribution to the peace effort in the Niger Delta with special attention to Jeta Amata’s *Black November*. The paper establishes the background upon which the research is undertaken, and the writers refer to the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956, which they categorically state has brought myriads of problems to the region (Ebekue and Nwoye 104). It is a fact that there has been a lingering crisis in the region which has led to loss of lives and properties. There have been countless efforts to find a permanent solution to the conflict. However, there seems to be a renewed agitation and restiveness resulting from the stoppage of the amnesty program that was instituted by the late President Yar Adua’s federal government (Ebekue and Nwoye 104). They discuss film as an artistic intervention in the context of conflict management stating that:

Film as an artistic intervention especially in the context of conflict management has its effectiveness hinged on its communication potential. Film is a medium of communication and as well an art. Nigerian film industry therefore can through the use of film contribute to the development of African culture. (Ebekue and Nwoye 110)

According to their analysis, Jeta Amata, through *Black November*, “contributes to the numerous attempts at restoring peace in the area and bringing to fore the evolution of the crisis from a popular perspective” (Ebekue and Nwoye 113). The point is that the government’s handling of the Niger Delta oil crisis has been poor and appears to lack sincerity. Added to this, are the nefarious roles played by the international oil firms that play dubious politics in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in oil producing communities. This, perhaps, underscores Omoera’s argument when he posited that Kunle Afolayan, and Jeta Amata, through *October 1* and *Black November* respectively unfurl different layers of human rights issues, including child abuse, women abuse, environmental pollution and degradation, widespread poverty,

community abuse, political thievery and corruption, etc., which have negatively impacted on Nigeria's struggle for development (Omoera 237).

Ayakoroma in "Contextualising Change in Nigeria's Leadership Question through the Film Medium: A Critical Reading of Jeta Amata's *Black November*" examines a volatile community in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria ravaged by crude oil exploration and exploitation activities of a multi-national oil company. The people fight against the evil machinations of corrupt government and oil company officials that collude to impoverish them (Ayakoroma 1). Ayakoroma's submission is that "only transparency in the policy actions of leaders, at federal, state, local government and community levels of governance, will mitigate incessant youth restiveness in oil-producing communities" (Ayakoroma 15). He argues that "the film medium remains a viable option in managing change in Nigeria's search for credible political leadership" (15).

The Marxist Film Theory and its Application

This study is undergirded by the ethos of Marxist Film Theory (MFT). MFT is a film theorization that uses the philosophy of Karl Marx to analyse film. It looks at the role of film in the context of the larger socio-economic structure and examines how films can reflect and influence social change. Marxist film theorists focus on the power dynamics between the dominant classes and the subordinate classes, as well as the ideological messages that films may contain. Marxist film theorists use Marxist ideas to analyse films in terms of their class-based content, their representation of social and economic power, and their potential to influence social and political change (Carter par.1). In other words, Marxist Film Theory (MFT) is a theoretical approach that emphasizes the ways in which films reflect and perpetuate class inequalities. It suggests that films are produced within a capitalist system that values profit over artistic expression and that the content of films is often shaped by the interests of the ruling class. It also stresses the ways in which films can be used to promote social change and challenge dominant power structures. Examples of Marxist filmmakers include Ken Loach, Michael Moore, and Oliver Stone (*Studocu* par.5).

MFT is one of the oldest forms of film theory. Sergei Eisenstein and many other Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s expressed ideas of Marxism through film. While this approach to Marxism and filmmaking was used, the loud complaint that the Russian filmmakers had was with the narrative structure of Hollywood filmmaking, which reflected an individualistic and capitalist perspective where a single individual had every other thing centred on him/her. Eisenstein's solution was to shun narrative structure by eliminating the individual protagonist and tell stories where the action is moved by the group and the story is told through a clash of one image against the next (whether in composition, motion, or idea) so that the audience is never lulled into believing that they are watching something that has not been worked over. This could be considered a socialist manner of film narration (Edwards 9).

The researchers find the MFT very suitable for this study. The films under review all seem to deploy the philosophy of Karl Marx in dealing with their situation—the proletariat of the Niger Delta fighting the bourgeoisie for justice and fair play. The

films are purposely produced to serve the role of film in the context of the larger socioeconomic structure of the Niger Delta and they are deployed to reflect and influence social change in the region. In the films under investigation, we can relate to the power dynamics between the dominant classes of the Niger Delta and the subordinate classes, as well as the diverging ideological positioning of the two classes that constitute the matrixes for continuous agitations. Consequently, this study recognizes in the films the representation of social and economic power, and their potential to influence social and political change.

Impact Assessment of Nollywood's Film Interventions in the Niger Delta

For decades, there have been lingering agitations with attendant crises resulting in loss of lives and properties and monumental destruction of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta region. Put in another way, the subject of the Niger Delta, which comprises the quagmire of the discovery of oil in the region, the attendant consequence of environmental degradation, the political drama surrounding it, the outcries of foul play and social injustices and the resultant agitations from the people and the lingering crises in the region; is one of the most long-time national issues in Nigeria. There have been several interventions, including from Nollywood, and countless efforts at finding a permanent solution to the conflict. Well-meaning Nollywood filmmakers, some from the region, have churned out films telling the story of the people for the most part. Notably among Nollywood's film interventions in the Niger Delta are films such as David Attwood's *Blood and Oil* (2010), Jeta Amata's *Black November* (2012), Curtis Graham's *Oloibiri* (2015). Others include Ikenna Aniekwe's *Liquid Black Gold I & II* (2008) and *Amnesty I & II* (2009), Charles Inojie's *Genesis I & II* (2010), Ugezu J. Ugezu's *King of Crude I & II* (2011).

This paper, therefore, undertakes an assessment of the progress and development in actionable measures taken, primarily by both the government and oil companies, in curbing environmental degradation and injustices, thereby bringing the citizens' agitations to rest; if at all, with the film interventions of Nollywood through the aforementioned film works. To gather data to that effect, the researchers employed document observation, media analysis and focused group discussion (FGD) instruments. The use of documents and visual tools in research entails the use of documents and other visual media to extract relevant data that is suitable for a particular research endeavour. Mason affirms that the analysis of documentary sources is a major method of social research and one which many qualitative researchers see as meaningful and appropriate in the context of their research strategy (Mason 103). She claims that there are many different ways of generating data through documents, including using the Internet, even as there are many different types of documents (Mason 103). These include books and other publications, newspapers and magazines, lecture notes, seminar papers, and websites, among others. Documents particularly analysed in this paper were newspapers and magazines both online and offline.

A focus group discussion (FGD) on the other hand, is a qualitative research method and data collection technique in which a selected group of people discusses a given topic or issue in-depth, facilitated by a professional, external moderator. This

method serves to solicit participants' attitudes and perceptions, knowledge and experiences, and practices, shared in the course of interaction with different people (Eeuwijk and Angehrn 1). Eeuwijk and Angehrn add that, "the technique is based upon the assumption that the group processes activated during an FGD help to identify and clarify shared knowledge among groups and communities, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain with a series of individual interviews" (1). For the sake of the challenge of rallying people with the knowledge of Niger Delta affairs physically, a WhatsApp group was created to drive the FGD; links were shared on relevant groups and communities from where participants were enlisted in the group. The group entitled "Focused Group Discussion on our Study" comprised a total of 24 members. However, only three (3) members responded to the discussion questions that were posed. The researchers conducted the discussion on the responses of the three (3) group members. The three members that responded were Hameed Olutoba Lawal of the Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife; Dr. Henry Obi Ajumeze, Lecturer, Theatre Studies at University of Manchester/United Kingdom; and Timchang Miri, a University of Jos/National Film Institute Jos' Film Culture and Archival Studies Master's student. The questions posed to guide the discussion include the following:

- i. In your opinion, how have the Nollywood films on the Niger Delta depicted and reflected the issue of environmental degradation, injustice and abuse of human rights, and the attendant agitations?
- ii. Since Nollywood's interventions in the Niger Delta with films such as *Blood and Oil* (2010), *Black November* (2012) and *Oloibiri* (2015), etc.; what is your assessment of the progress and development in actionable measures taken, primarily by both the government and oil companies, in curbing environmental degradation and injustices in the region, thereby bringing the citizens' agitations to rest, which you would admit the Nollywood films on the Niger Delta inspired or contributed to?
- iii. What, in your opinion, is the level of changes attained, if at all, obviously inspired by the interventions of Nollywood with films on the Niger Delta? Is there still much more that needs to be done, to lay to rest the issues of climate change and agitations in Nigeria's Niger Delta that Nollywood can still contribute to making it happen through carefully crafted stories? If yes, what more do you suggest should be done?

In responding to discussion question one, Lawal acknowledged that "the films in focus vividly captured the environmental degradation and agitations in Niger Delta region of Nigeria to sensitize national and international communities." Timchang corroborated Lawal's position stating that the films on the Niger Delta are "very emotive films with high concentrations of screen and psychoanalytic theories used to drive the true stories of the Niger Delta people and the neglect of their fundamental rights to live." Henry, on the other hand, during the discussion had major observations to make, which are equally captured in the study. However, his contribution is suggestive of the fact that he alludes to the claims of Lawal and Timchang. It is thus

clear that, the films on the Niger Delta to a large extent have significantly captured the realities of the region.

Making their contributions to the second question, Lawal answered in the affirmative that “there have been rehabilitative and palliative measures by the oil companies and the federal government for the degraded environment and the pauperized peasants. But these efforts are being sabotaged by the political elites, community leaders and youth.” Timchang answered in the same light as Lawal and stated that there have been interventions, making reference to statements made by the federal government, particularly the announcement of the award of contract for the cleaning of Ogoniland by the President Muhammadu Buhari administration. Another government programme Timchang referenced is the Amnesty programme and the creation of the Niger Delta Commission. Moreover, the establishment of a university/polytechnic to focus on oil, refining, petroleum engineering, etc., are all developments Timchang spotlighted. By the same token, Timchang confessed “but all of these have not reflected in significant progress and development of the people and the environment. This may be due to corruption and other factors.” The researchers agree with Timchang totally. He confirmed Lawal’s submission. He cited an example of the impact of Nollywood’s film interventions in the Niger Delta affairs with Jeta Amata’s *Black November*. The film premiered in the United States of America with the then president Barack Obama physically seated with oil multi-nationals. This Timchang stated is a direct achievement in creating awareness to the world and the headquarters of the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region.

Admittedly, Timchang stated the screening of these films (films on the Niger Delta) created more awareness to people who are not from the area or who may have never lived there. The question would be, how does that impact the region? We believe even communicating the plight of the people, for global awareness, is an effort; for it is awareness that generates pressure from different groups that spur parties responsible to reasonable and definite measures to address issues. For instance, in the reference Timchang made to *Black November*, there is more than he stated. It is reported that *Black November* has had significant impact—Amata and associate producer Lorenzo Omo-Aligbe were invited to the White House regarding the film; Congressman Bobby Rush and his Republican colleague Jeff Fortenberry were so affected by the film that they sponsored a joint resolution aimed at pressurizing the Nigerian government and Western oil companies to clean up spills in the Niger Delta (Kogbara and Otas par. 1; Sesay par. 1). Ajumeze on the other hand, contended that:

The framing of the discussion questions, especially questions two and three appear to suggest that changes in the region are traceable to the filmic interventions only. In other words, these questions ignore the other variables in the politics of the region, and draws an insular conclusion to the perceived transformations that have occurred in the Niger delta. Without undermining the impact of literature and arts in human politics, this assumption may require some further unpacking and problematising. How do you measure the effect—even affect—of art in politics, is the question here.

For Ajumeze, there was a significant shift in disciplinary focus from discussion question one – which is cultural and artistic – to questions two and three – that he

considered outside the frame of the film/art. To this contention from Ajumeze, the researchers explained the crux of their study “we are actually looking at the effect of art on what happens around us and the intervention of artists. Remember, every society gives birth to its own art. The Artist is a product of the society in which s/he lives....” At any rate, Ajumeze appeared not to have fully comprehend the discussion questions though his contention was valid. The questions the researchers posed did not suggest that changes in the region are traceable to the film interventions only. We acknowledge that there are other variables in the politics of the region, and the perceived transformations that have occurred in the Niger Delta are not solely a result of Nollywood film interventions. Nevertheless, with Ajumeze’s suggestion, the FGD questions were improved upon, as they appeared above, to communicate effectively the problem and objectives of the study. Thus, the researchers affirm the impact of literature and the arts in human politics. Against the backdrop of Ajumeze’s question of “how do you measure the effect – even affect – of art in politics, is the question here” that we wish to state that there are ways to measure using different parameters.

In response to the third question, Lawal stated that the film interventions from Nollywood have stimulated and led to the empowerment of restless youth and the provision of infrastructural facilities that include roads, hospitals and schools. Lawal admitted, “however, much still needs to be done in orientation on climate change and proactive measures to checkmate its menace on land and water resources.” Perhaps, what Lawal failed to state is the definite measures that should be taken by Nollywood filmmakers to achieve what he suggested. Timchang, on the other hand, submitted he didn’t have any evidence to show the level of changes that may have taken place in the Niger Delta with film interventions from Nollywood. Nevertheless, Timchang suggested what more should be done by filmmakers is “to make investigative films on the government’s handling of the problems – corruption, bureaucracy, sabotage, etc. The researchers unravelled that filmmakers are coming to terms with the reality that more is required over the matters of the Niger Delta. It is worthy to note that while this study was going on, a new film on Niger Delta environmental degradation was released in May 2023 in Abuja. The film, *Akpama*. *Akpama*, is produced by Shan George. It is a feisty docudrama that projects the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta. The film is an adaptation of the novel, *Presumed Guilty*, by Anegebe Anthony Asemokhai. It tells the story of a young man, Akpama who takes laws into his own hands in an effort to protect his people from certain spearheads and their activities in the society. The film is an exposure of the crisis and the health hazards that the Niger Delta people are passing through (Oshoko par.2).

The release of *Akpama* attests to this study’s earlier presumption of the necessity for Nollywood to churn out more films on the Niger Delta affairs as events must have assumed new dimensions and new dynamics have arisen in the course of time. This is necessary because, if filmmakers fail to persist with their interventions in speaking up on the issues through rationally crafted stories with powerful and dynamic characters, the issues would not be properly addressed and laid to rest. Thus, the Niger Delta ecosystem will continue to be degraded. This ultimately will affect the inhabitants and likely result in recurrent agitations. The researchers also realised that

in as much as the review of documents and discussions undertaken have pointed to the state of the Niger Delta ecosystem after Nollywood's film interventions; observation, even participant observation and personal interview instruments will be more effective in gathering and generating more accurate data on the subject. The researchers, in this case would have to travel to the Niger Delta and visit the respective areas that have been environmentally degraded by oil exploration. The researchers would have to interact with different authorities, ranging from the government to the oil companies to the host communities and even the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the region. This way, a more robust, all-inclusive, and realistic data would be gathered regarding this subject. This constitutes the limitation of this study.

Conclusion

This paper has undertaken an assessment of the progress and development in actionable measures taken, primarily by both the government and oil companies, in curbing environmental degradation and injustices in the Niger Delta, thereby bringing the citizens' agitations to rest; since Nollywood's film interventions with great films like *Blood and Oil* (2010), *Black November* (2012), *Oloibiri* (2015), among others. It interrogated the level of changes attained, with the interventions from Nigeria's film industry with particular reference to the known films on the Niger Delta. The paper adopted the qualitative research approach and explored the use of document observation, media analysis and focused group discussion instruments anchored in the Marxist Film Theory. Although there have been significant changes that can be attributed to the interventions of Nollywood films, more needs to be done by filmmakers, to lay to rest the issues of climate change and agitations in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

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