

**TRAUMA AND THE SPECTACLE OF THE OTHER:
CULTURAL MEMORY IN MAINFRAME'S SAWOROIDE**

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Abstract

The definitive category of the term 'Nollywood' may need no further extension. Scholars, both in Nigeria and abroad, have drawn issues, made allusions, problematised and provoked amazing dialectics on the proper definition of the subject. There is, however, a general consensus on scope: Nollywood is the term that refers to films, especially the home video format, made, produced and particularly peculiar to Nigeria. Furthermore, so much more has been written on Nollywood and its influence in the propagation and promotion of the African (specifically Nigerian) culture. If the dynamism of technology in its continual evolution were foreclosed, the issue of Nollywood and culture could have been termed an absolute cliché. This paper thus examines Nollywood and culture from a rather unconventional purview: how it transmits cultural memory, thereby eliciting some form of traumatic remembering and catharsis at the same time.

Keywords: Trauma, Cultural Memory, Nollywood, Mainframe, Saworoide,

Introduction

We must first attempt to make meaning of the conceptual triad of *culture, memory and cultural memory* as they affect this paper. Culture describes the many ways in which human beings express themselves for the purpose of uniting with others, forming a group, defining an identity, and even for distinguishing themselves as being unique. Most formal definitions of culture describe it as the way of life of a certain group of people in a particular society. However, a more embracing perspective on culture will consider all the material and nonmaterial expressions of a

people as well as the processes with which the expressions are communicated. Culture in that sense could therefore depict glaring similarities between people within the same territorial space that fosters a feeling of oneness that they would wish to preserve for future generations. Although culture is not necessarily for the survival of the human species, notions of culture and cultural identities are present in almost every human society on earth. As the world moves closer together through increased globalisation, migration, and technological advancement, human beings are beginning to question the role (and reach) of culture within all aspects of the human existence. The questions have reflected on how culture has historically been used to justify and legitimise certain behaviours, practices, traditions, and overall ways of living. Film is, therefore, one of the ways of propagating culture.

Film and Culture

Over the years, the medium of film has come to be closely associated with the culture industry. In Nigeria, such a role for the film industry is still evolving although certain factors are altering the profile of what could be regarded as the country's culture. Local cultures in their original form have therefore become secondary considerations in film content. Local cultures are, of course, in transition all over the world. Globalisation is setting the pace in the interaction of cultures with the consequence that local cultures are being made less significant. Despite this setback, film is still a great transmitter of Nigeria's culture. As far back as 1979, even when the home video industry was yet to berth, Arulogun (1979: 26) had remarked that "film is a powerful tool for the transmission of cultural values". He identified three main areas where film could further the cause of cultural identity as follows:

1. **As a propaganda tool:** Film remains a vehicle employed by governments and others interested in the art of subtle diplomacy. Having regard to its popularity as an entertainment

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medium, it easily becomes a means of relaying and reinforcing information meant to promote a certain reality.

2. **As a creator of stereotypes:** Film helps to shape perspectives on a people's culture. The impressions which viewers develop about a people and their cultural values are greatly influenced by film portrayals.
3. **As an educational medium:** Film covers issues in the school curricula as well as general knowledge, thus educating the viewers about different countries and peoples of the world.

Kafewo (1999: 29) corroborates this view when he remarks that

Film, no doubt, is one of the art forms that are the greatest carriers of our cultures and values. This is why it has been deployed as comrade-in-arms by different countries in the world to propagate their cultures. Lenin had no doubt that the cinema held the greatest promise in the struggle for the sustenance and spread of the Russian revolution. What we know today about the American, British, Indian, and the so-called Chinese films (actually made in Hong Kong) came from the arts ably carried by the film medium.

By this definition, we make culture to assume a subjective stance, “presenting itself as taste, aptitude, knowledge and know-how, beliefs, opinions, assumed and lived attitudes. Culture from this point of view is literally a mode of existence” (Towa, 1985:28).

Cultural Memory

Often taken for granted, memory is usually left to psychologists and biologists and to the newly developed cognitive science. But memory in the humanities is central to what is meant by society and to all social interaction that provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping to define who they are, why they are here and where they

are going. Memory, in other words, is central to individual and collective identity. It has become a faculty that is gendered, appropriated, politicised, nationalised, medicalised, and aestheticised. In the study of memory in the humanities, attention is paid to absence, distance, witness, testimony, tradition, nostalgia, and forgetting. As it is in this paper, memory can become a strategy for social justice by recalling the forgotten or the oppressed to bear witness. It requires reading history away from the positivist narrative to a history of mnemonic traces, endlessly recited, reiterated and recombined. Hutton (1972: 362) asserts that "memory originates in the ontological act of creating images in order to give form and meaning to the phenomena of the world. But as civilisation advances, memory comes to be identified with mimesis, i.e., mimicking or repeating the creative act in order to discover its original meaning." Memory is now the focus of interest to people across a range of academic disciplines, far more than it was a few decades ago. It is no longer the sole province of psychology or medical biology.

Cultural memory is the major driving concept of this paper, and as such a conceptual analysis of the terminology is expedient. The terminology is ambiguous and varied, produced and negotiated through images, sites, objects, and representation. The process of cultural memory is bound up in complex political stakes and meanings. It both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed. To define memory as cultural is, in effect, to enter into another argument about what that memory means. This process does not exclude the individual, but rather involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of meaning. Because cultural memory is political, and because different experiences and representations struggle for a place in history, memory is crucial to understanding a culture since it reveals collective desires, needs, self definitions and power struggles. It is important to state that this paper does not privilege the use of memory over the study of culture. It does not claim that culture as an area of study is redundant or, as many others who favour the material study of culture over memory, that memory make claims of access to an

absolute truth about the past. It is simply that the fluidity and changeability of memory's approach to the past offers the most applicable framework upon which to map the effect of some films upon collective and cultural identity. Susannah Radstone has effectively paved the way by stating that "memory has become both a central and an organizing concept within research in the humanities and in certain branches of the social sciences" (2001: 3). The renewed interest in the study of memory has been influenced by the works of Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin and Halbwachs, as well as the decline of belief in grand narratives and the realisation of the multivocal nature of the past. As cultural memory is a fluid area that can accept and absorb different trends and perspectives simultaneously, it is the contention of this paper that as a product of the culture industry, film becomes part of a vast intertextual mosaic of remembering and forgetting that is constantly redefining, or reimagining, the narrative of the Nigerian political environment in the popular consciousness. In a conception of cultural memory in which versions of the past exist and there is struggle for meaning amongst other representations, it is futile to examine a socio-political film in isolation against the historiography on its subject. Therefore, a brief on the Nigerian political terrain is apt at this stage.

Nollywood and The Nigerian Scene

A quick assessment of developments in Nigeria, at all levels since the mid 1990s will highlight remarkable departure and erosion of especially leadership values. At all levels of the Nigerian society, standards have crashed and leadership requirements have been reduced to purely material (money) wellbeing. Anyone with money can buy his/her way to power at all levels, be it local governments, states, federal government and even nongovernmental organisations. In the circumstance, people with poor knowledge, without any vision, lacking a sense of priority and often of doubtful integrity are vested with leadership responsibility.

Citizens are coerced, blackmailed or hoodwinked to support so-called leaders based on primordial sentiments with the leaders hardly challenged to win support of other Nigerians beyond their immediate narrow support base, often limited to their birth places, local government areas, senatorial districts, states, geo-political zones, but hardly the nation as a whole. Ethnic and religious factors have therefore emerged today as perhaps the most defining factors for leadership positions in the country. As a result, there are occasions whereby leaders are produced with very narrow and parochial perception of their constituencies. This practice is widespread in many contemporary political and economic institutions in Nigeria. It may be argued that this has been with the nation since independence and has thus become an acceptable norm about which little or nothing can be. This thus projects Nigeria as a fractured nation and promotes primordial hatred and anger among its people. This is the core background of the film *Saworoide*, the focus of the present study.

Marianne Hirsch asserts that cultural memory involves

...acts of transfer in which individuals and groups construct and perform their identities by recollecting a shared past of contested norms, conventions, and practices. These memorial acts of transfer involve the dynamic negotiation between past and present, the individual and the collective, the public and private, recalling and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, consciousness and unconsciousness, fears and desires. These mediated cultural memories are the effect and affect of fragmented personal and collective experiences articulated, performed, and interpreted through various technologies or media of memory (2002: 5).

The observation best captures this paper's orientation in its application of cultural memory to the Nollywood film, *Saworoide*.

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The understanding of the term “cultural memory” as employed in this paper is attributed to Paul Connerton’s notion of an “act of transfer” (1989: 39) – an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested, norms, conventions, and practices. These transactions emerge out of a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recalling and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears or desires. Always mediated, cultural memory is the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and the media that shape even as they transmit memory. Acts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation, and interpretation. They require agents and specific contexts. They can be conscious and deliberate at the same time, and this is certainly true in the case of trauma, which can be involuntary, repetitious and obsessive.

Although Nollywood has traditionally defined its products as entertainment, the industry has also relied on topical issues for acceptance and commercial success. The audience responds to compelling topical stories, provided that the subjects of such stories have genuine and salient points that are presented within an interesting narrative form. *Saworoide* is analysed in the context of a fluid and negotiated cultural memory. It is therefore part of a vast intertextual mosaic of remembering and forgetting that is constantly redefining, and reimagining, the past. Representations of history in popular films affect the industrial construction of cultural memory; but Nollywood’s intertextual relay of promotion and accompanying wider media discourses also contributes to a climate in which film impacts upon collective memory. It means then that what we know about the past, and our understanding of the present, are both shaped by the voices that speak to us out of history. Relative degrees of power and powerlessness,

privilege and disenfranchisement determine the spaces where witnesses and testimony may be heard or ignored. Also, it means that the individual story, whether told through oral narrative, fiction, film, testimony, or performance, also serves as a challenge and a counter-memory to official hegemonic history.

Saworoide is a Yoruba Nollywood film produced in 1999 by Mainframe Film and Television Productions and directed by Tunde Kelani, an ace Nigerian film maker. The film opens with the frame of a drum and a drummer beating it. The drum is laced with an array of brass bells described in the course of the narrative as 'saworoide'. The image of the drum which is revealed through a close-shot, coupled with the drum message that attends it, negotiates the real essence of the story. It is the story of the pact between an ancient community and the kings that ruled over it. The succeeding images and sound reveal an old man who narrates the events that led to the pact and the binding rules surrounding the solemn arrangement. This is interspersed with an array of images of drum parts and other elements brought into the making of *Saworoide*. The pact also requires the making of a brass-crown which is associated with 'saworoide' in a twin-like manner. The use of documentary style in a flashback form in this sequence does not only help in collapsing time but also introduces a unique narrative style that is essentially African. The opening of the film conjures up some semiotic signification. It is deeply rooted in Yoruba cultural values. This underscores the fact that the film has substantial elements to qualify it as a cultural item. However, the orientation of this paper does not tend toward these overt peculiarities of culture (as mentioned in the earlier paragraphs), but a psychological assemblage of a group of people who conceive their uniqueness through a common image of the past. With this clarification, we proceed to give an exposé of the film.

***Saworoide*: A brief overview**

The movie was set in the rustic town of Jogbo. Lapite is the dubious King that has murdered his way to the throne and now rules Jogbo with

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terror. The chieftains of the town team up with Lapite to jointly siphon the commonwealth of Jogbo which lies in sales of timber. Timber, the mainstay of Jogbo economy is being processed and sold illegitimately with the help of a cartel made up of some expatriates. The expatriates, in collusion with the king, keep ruining the lands of Jogbo; the once arable lands are being destroyed as timbers are being cut down illegitimately without any form of replacement. The youths in the town decide to take up action by embarking on a virulent protest. Having presented their plight to Lapite, the King of Jogbo, who meets it with strong resistance, they resort to fire power and hence ensure that the expatriates are frustrated from their lands. The daytime drama keeps going back and forth until Lagata, the army officer who helps Lapite recover Adeide – the sacred crown of Jogbo – starts to lust for the kingship of Jogbo town.

In a classic face off during the gala to mark the return of the sacred crown to the palace, Lagata overthrows Lapite to become the first military head of the town. Lapite is killed along with some unfortunate chieftains. That marks the start of another reign of terror in Jogbo as Lagata tightens the fist of iron rule. However, deliverance comes the way of the commoners of Jogbo when Ayanniyi, the son of Ayangalu, the official custodian and player of the saworoide (the spiritual drum played at kings' coronations) plays the drum during Lagata's coronation while he is donning the Adeide – the sacred crown of Jogbo. It is forbidden for the drum to be played to the hearing of an illegitimate king while donning the crown, otherwise he will die of enormous headache. And that is exactly what happens to Lagata on the night of his coronation when the drum is played. For those who are familiar with the political and economic history of Nigeria, the film is a classic allegory which examines the political traumas that have befallen post-independence Nigeria.

***Saworoide*: Layers of cultural memory**

Saworoide is an agency of cultural memory which is unlike the traditional archives of history, because it consists not only of the stories, images, or documents of the past but also of the acts of transfer without which we would have no access to those histories. It follows the definition of cultural memory by James Young who terms it as "received history"; "the combined study of both what happened and how it is passed down to us" (Young, 1997: 41). Young's position situates the film as an act of telling and listening, performing and watching, and most importantly, an act of retelling or, in the language of performance, of 'twice-behaved behaviour'. And it acknowledges the unavailability of the original experience and the fragmentary and mediated nature of the reconstruction. Indeed, as Deborah McDowell puts it, "what we call the past is merely a function and production of a continuous present and its discourses" (1989: 147). As an agency of cultural memory, the film is firmly situated in a recent past yet looks toward the future; it is the encounter between the self of the portrait and the space that resonates with history. The present is thus composed of numerous layered temporalities that come together in the film's projection. The film becomes a retrospective witness that has opened a door to the past and invited its viewers to join in its exploration. Against the frame of a drummer who is drumming a tepid cultural tune, the opening monologue narration is heard; "This is the parable of the Drum as the voice of the people" (*Saworoide*). The use of such frame with the narration would seem to suggest that cultural memory is most forcefully transmitted through the individual voice and body – through the testimony of a witness. This is not to say that the witness tells only of his or her own memory; as Maurice Halbwachs has made clear, "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognise, and localise their memories" (1992: 38). Promptly, any observer of Nigeria's history is bound to sense that the subject of the film tends to recall to our cultural consciousness the trauma of the never-ending struggle of the country with the concept of democracy.

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It is imperative to realise that the notions of cultural memory in this paper proceeds from an operative metaphor. The concept of "remembering" (a cognitive process which takes place in individual brains) is metaphorically transferred to the level of culture. In this metaphorical sense, scholars speak of a "nation's memory," a "religious community's memory," or even of "literature's memory" (which, according to Renate Lachmann, is its intertextuality). This crucial distinction between two aspects of cultural memory studies is what Jeffrey K. Olick draws our attention to when he maintains that "two radically different concepts of culture are involved here, one that sees culture as a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds versus one that sees culture as patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society" (2003: 336). In other words, we have to differentiate between two levels on which culture and memory intersect: the individual and the collective or, more precisely, the level of the cognitive on the one hand, and the levels of the social and the media, on the other. The first level of cultural memory is concerned with biological memory. It draws attention to the fact that no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts. From the people we live with and from the media we use, we acquire schemata which help us recall the past and encode new experience. Our memories are often triggered as well as shaped by external factors, ranging from conversation among friends to books and to places. In short, we remember in sociocultural contexts. With regard to this first level, "memory" is used in a literal sense, whereas the attribute "cultural" is a metonymy, standing for the "socio-cultural contexts and their influence on memory." It is especially within oral history, social psychology, and the neurosciences that cultural memory is understood according to this first aspect of the term. This is why the first narration which simultaneously flashes on the screen: "This is the parable of the Drum as the voice of the people", becomes inherently important in the context of

cultural memory as it triggers a collective remembering. Through its narrative, visual images and dialogues, *Saworoide* possesses a certain kind of context in which films are prepared and received as memory-shaping media.

The second level of cultural memory refers to the symbolic order, the media, institutions, and practices by which social groups construct a shared past. "Memory", here, is used metaphorically. Societies do not remember literally; but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs. A few dialogic examples from the film become meaningful here. In a particular scene in the film where a press conference is held with the obnoxious king, Lapite, a journalist who asks a pertinent question about the corrupt nature of Lapite's government is promptly shut up. After the conference, the king's police orderly remarks to the king: "Your highness, I'll deal with him. He's spending the night in detention." Chief Balogun (one of the king's corrupt stooges) quickly buttresses this diabolical intention by offering to organise "a small accident for him, his mouth needs realignment". Obviously here, one begins to truly bear witness to the manifestations of the non-tolerant, autocratic and insensitive nature of the leaders as exemplified in Nigeria's socio-political experience. It is also in this context that memory becomes traumatic remembering owing to the dialogic and visual trauma triggers in the film. This evident assertion allows us to conclude that the representational media that function as technologies of memory perform important cultural memory work in constituting and consolidating group identities which have become important in contemporary study of culture. This is certainly true for the cultural recall of traumatic events as Mieke Bal claims in her introduction to *Acts of Memory* (authored by her and two others) that, "Art – and other cultural artifacts such as photographs and published texts of all kinds – can mediate between the parties to the traumatizing scene and between these and the reader or

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viewer. The recipients of the account perform an act of memory that is potentially healing, as it calls for political and cultural solidarity in recognising the traumatised party's predicament" (Bal, Crewe, et al 1999: X). This completely fits into the earlier summation in this paper in keeping with Paul Connerton's conception of cultural memory.

In another scene in the film, the youths of Jogbo approach one of the timber loggers who pretentiously anticipate a change in the government of the town for financial assistance to prosecute their revolution. When the youths explain their seeming helplessness in executing the revolution, he remarks: "Don't worry, there's a truck outside filled with guns, machetes, tear gas, various arms and ammunition at your disposal." This particular scene underscores the reality of the prevalent situation in Nigeria where politicians and multi-millionaire businessmen arm youths in preparation for elections. Social researchers have concluded that such arms have been used by the youths later after elections for robbery, banditry, militancy, rebellion and terrorism – all social vices which have been the bane of Nigeria's existence. As evidenced in the film, the notion of cultural memory has quite successfully directed our attention to the close connection that exists between, say, a nation's version of its past and its version of present national identity. That memory and identity are closely linked on the individual level is a commonplace fact that goes back at least to John Locke, who maintains that there is no such thing as an essential identity, but that identities have to be constructed and reconstructed by acts of memory, by remembering who one was and by setting this past self in relation to the present self. The concept of cultural memory has opened the way to the study of these processes at a collective level.

Saworoide: A Political Allegory

The overthrow of King Lapite by the military general Lagata is rather peculiar. In his broadcast speech on the occasion of the coup, he

declares; "Let me congratulate you all, for the change has now come. We your soldiers have now taken over government." In further scenes ahead, when Balogun and Seriki pay him an unsolicited courtesy visit, he makes known his innate intention: "In that case, let me tell you straight that I'm in this to make money." This is typical of the collective memory Nigerians have of the military. They swept away the civilians claiming to be the new broom but they ended up being worse than those they have driven out from government. There were many broken promises, corruption became widespread and there was extravagant spending on a level never witnessed before not only in Nigeria but also in other parts of the world. As a matter of fact, the World Bank, which hitherto had always tended to be quiet about internal politics of nations could not resist the temptation of the urgent need to speak out during Babangida's military regime by criticising it for spending two billion pounds without budgeting. The Abacha government came into being following the dismissal of the Interim National Government put in place by General Babangida. The regime turned out to be one most Nigerians would never forget in a hurry and which perhaps excites the most traumatic cultural memory. Never since the country's independence has anyone witnessed so much corruption and flagrant abuse of power by those in position of authority as witnessed during the bloody regime of General Sanni Abacha. Innocent people disappeared without trace; trumped-up charges were made by the government as an excuse for arresting and trying those in opposition with resultant convictions and imprisonments. The judicial arm of government connived with the ruthless government or, at times, acted as a passive bystander. State terrorism was rampant and corruption was blatant. In short, Nigeria, throughout this brutal regime went through her darkest era yet.

In cultural memory, the places of memory must remain concrete and distinct, irrespective of the circumstances, whether they are mythological or historical reminders. The media of cultural memory, however, are rarely uncontroversial. Their memory-making effect lies not in the unity, coherence, and ideological unambiguousness of the

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images they convey, but instead in the fact that they serve as cues for the discussion of those images, thus centring a memory culture on certain media representations and sets of questions connected with them. Scrutinising the cultural practices surrounding socio-political and historical movies, this paper concludes that it is not in the first place the medial and inter-medial strategies that turn a 'film about history' into a 'memory-making film,' but instead what has been established around them. A tight network of other media representations and medially represented actions prepare the ground for the movies, lead reception along certain paths, open up and channel public discussion, and thus endow films with their memorial meaning. *Saworoide* ably fulfils the set criteria by craftily weaving its narrative along the incongruous and recognisable socio-political pre-1999 government of Nigeria and releasing the film at the wake of the country's purported "new democracy".

Filmography

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