

# NIGERIAN VIDEO FILMS AND THE IMAGE QUESTION

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## Abstract

*Since its emergence in the early 1990s and the attendant flurry of productions, the Nigerian Home Video Industry has been serving the multipurpose functions of reflecting the social realities, promoting and preserving of the different cultures that make up the entity called Nigeria. This is exemplified in Yoruba Home Videos from the Lagos-Ibadan axis, the English versions from the Onitsha-Enugu-Aba axis and the Hausa versions from the Kano-Jos axis. Their major advantage is their ease of accessibility to the different linguistic strata of the society. This explains why the video appears to have relegated the stage, television and celluloid to the background. This accessibility is further strengthened with the advent of cable television readily available to subscribers. It is against this background that this paper examines how this popular media can be harnessed for image making, in a more effective way than the expensive government sloganeering, which seems to have made minimal impact.*

## Introduction

After more than a decade of existence, the Nigerian video film industry can be said to have made much impact when assessed from the perspective of the decolonization of the country's cinematographic art. Before the advent of the home video in Nigeria, the celluloid films, exhibited in the public cinema halls of Nigerian towns and cities were mostly American, Indian and Chinese films which promoted the social realities and culture of these countries.

The attempts towards the decolonization of the Nigerian film industry began with the production of celluloid films by cineastes such as Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugboma, Hubert Ogunde, Moses Olaiya and Afolabi Afolayan. This early initiative never made much impact, however, before it was stifled by the vagaries of the economy. With this development, the indigenous film makers soon found an alternative cheaper means of production in the home video.

Ever since its emergence, the home video has witnessed massive growth in production, distribution and exhibition. An attestation to the rapid growth of the Nigerian Home Video is the enormous production of films on monthly basis and the rapid springing up of the video clubs and marketing outlets in every nook and cranny of Nigeria. It is on record that distribution and exhibition of Nigerian video films have even gone beyond the shores of Nigeria to other African countries, America and Europe. As Barclays Ayakoroma (2008: 28) observes,

a positive development in the film industry has been the capturing of the Black and African film market in such a way that Nigeria video film actors/actresses enjoy the glamour of stardom that, perhaps, apart from soccer, video film industry has positively projected Nigeria on the international scene.

The thematic pre-occupation of these video films equally ranges from reflection of the social realities in Nigeria to culture and history. In tracing the development of the Nigerian Film Industry, Ayakoroma (2008: 271-275) identifies the following genres: Epic or Historical, Prostitution or Ghetto life, Traditional Beliefs, Love and Romance, Crime/Gangster, Comedy, Adventure, Politics, Horror film, Thrillers, Christian films and Gender stories. It is important to also note that, these themes are expounded in the English, Yoruba and Hausa video films produced in Nigeria, and they have gone a long way in bridging the gap created by the



absence of American, Indian and Chinese films while, at the same time, promoting and preserving the African cultural values.

### **Nigeria and the Image Question**

The national image, as Tracie Utoh-Ezeajuh (2008:255) observes, should be viewed from two angles: the image of a nation as projected by that nation, and the image of a nation as perceived by other nations. The projection of the image of a nation is much more effectively done through the media. It is the reportage and documentation of the unfolding events by the print and the electronic media that determine the perception. The immediacy and audio-visual power of the screen fast-tracks its dissemination of news and information locally and internationally. Ironically, the Nigerian home video films, which could be explored to redeem the battered image of Nigeria, have themselves come under a lot of criticism for portraying Nigeria negatively through emphasis on rituals, violence and criminal activities.

The negative impression about Nigeria, however, predates this boom period of the video films. This is traceable to the crisis of political leadership as corroborated by Utoh-Ezeajuh (2008:255) in the following words:

Nigeria as a nation loves chasing shadows, despite the obvious fact staring us in the face that much of the muck staining the nation's image is coming from the uncleaned Augean stables of the ruling class.

The Nigerian political history is replete with attempts by the past leaders of Nigeria (military and civilian) to re-orientate Nigerians on new ways of life to uplift the image of the country. This began with the Murtala/Obasanjo military regime which confronted vices in political, social and economic spheres of our national life with military dispatch. This manifested in the purging of the public service of deadwood and the corrupt ones, the introduction of low profile economic policy to reduce the cost of governance and the

determined bid to maintain the giant status of Nigeria in the African Continent. General Murtala Ramat Mohammed's revolutionary move was, unfortunately, cut short when he fell to the bullet of coup plotters six months later.

When democracy was restored in 1979, the civilian regime of Alhaji Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari, conscious of the criticism of the opposing camp on wastages and profligacy in governance, introduced a programme of social change christened 'Ethical Revolution'. This programme, which aimed at sensitizing and re-orientating Nigerians on the need to refine their behaviours and attitudes, did not make much impact because the Nigerian leadership lacked the political will to lead by example. While they were preaching prudence, the politicians in government flaunted their ill-gotten wealth in the midst of grinding poverty among the masses.

The resultant increase in inflation, unemployment and under employment compelled Nigerians, out of frustration and desperation, to engage in fraudulent acts, drug trafficking, armed robbery, prostitution, among others. The strong desire to travel abroad for greener pasture can be traced to this unfortunate period of Nigeria's history.

Attempts by successive regimes to curb these image-staining vices became a herculean task as they gained wider dimensions with each regime. When many Nigerians legally engaged in Europe and America were being embarrassed because of the criminal acts of drug traffickers, the Buhari/Idiagbon military regime in 1984 introduced death penalty for the offence, and ruthlessly enforced it. To check the growing indiscipline, the regime introduced a re-orientation programme called War Against Indiscipline (WAI). But, like the earlier 'ethical revolution' it turned out to be ineffectual, and the policy was generally criticized as being too harsh, subsequently coming to an end when the regime itself was overthrown.

When General Ibrahim Babangida (rtd) took over, in 1985, he refined WAI under the new nomenclature of 'Mass



Mobilisation for Social Justice and Economic Reliance' (MAMSER) headed by the sweet talking Professor Jerry Gana, with a network of state branches. After gulping substantial funds, MAMSER also went the way of the various programmes before it.

The most recent effort to rescue Nigeria's battered international image is the re-branding project of the present regime, initiated by Professor Dora Akunyili, the then Minister for Information and Orientation with the slogan: 'Good people, Great Nation', on March 22, 2009. It was intended to correct the official perception of Nigeria as one of the most corrupt nations in the world (<http://www.voices.com>). It was launched with a lot of fanfare and has since generated more debate and discourse than the intended conscientisation. To Jide Ajani, a journalist with *The Vanguard* newspaper,

what Professor Akunyili needs to re-brand is the attitude of government officials, starting from members of the Federal Executive Council, FEC, to the ruling People's Democratic Party Governors (<http://www.voices.com>).

This observation agrees with that of Utoh-Ezeajuh (2008:255) to the effect that

Our leaders must wake up to the fact that no amount of propagandist film image, television broadcast or news report can polish the image of Nigeria when all the facts are there and the evidence of a decaying society remains there for all to see.

### **Nigerian Video Films and Image Laundering**

The image of Nigeria being portrayed in the Nigerian video films in English, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa has been very controversial.

While some critics accused the film makers of emphasizing the negative aspects of our culture and social realities, others criticized them for emphasizing community or individual values instead of

articulating national values (Ossai 20002: 26). The puzzle this assertion raises is, which of our values should be projected as 'national' from the different cultures that made up the entity called Nigeria? Questions still begging for answers as identified by Utoh-Ezeajuh (2008: 255) are:

Should the Nigerian film industry shirk in their fundamental duty of entertaining, educating and informing the populace, by no longer presenting the reality of Nigerian social existence? Should the hopes, aspirations and yearnings of the people be sacrificed on the altar of falsehood and propaganda?

A close watch of the thematic focus of the video films reveals their potentials for image laundering, if well harnessed. Video films that fall into this category include the ones that explore themes of traditional beliefs, history, gangsterism, politics and religion. Among the films that depict traditional beliefs are: *Blood of the Orphan* (Okafor 1999), and *Bonds of Tradition* (Orji 2004), *Magun* (Thunderbolt, Kelani, 2000), and *The Narrow Path* (Kelani 2006). In these films, the norms and values of traditional African societies, which attempt to promote and preserve cherished African values and inculcate them in the young ones, are portrayed.

Closely aligned to this group are historical films that document our past and present for future references. Films that exemplify this thematic pre-occupation include Lere Paimo's *Ogbori Elemoso*, which dramatizes how Ogbomoso town came into being; *Afonja* (2003), which documents how the Yoruba lost Ilorin to the Fulani; *Ogunmola, Basorun Ibadan* (2008), which recounts the war of supremacy between Kurunmi and Ogunmola; and *Efunsetan Aniwura* (2005), which portrays the exploits of the then Iyalode of Ibadan at the height of her glory. Films on crimes and gangsterism that capture the realities of the crime rate have the potentials of sensitizing the government to rise to its responsibility of protecting lives and property. At the same time, they expose the flaws of the policing system in crime prevention and detection.



Video films that readily come to mind here include *Koseegbe* (Kelani, 1995); *Issakaba* (Imasuen, 2000); *Broad Daylight* (Benson, 2001); and, more recently, *Ijapa* (Salami, 2009). Video films characterized by this subject matter are said to be 'replete with violence as criminals operate outside and (in defiance) of the law under one guise or the other' Ayakoroma (2008:273). They highlight the inadequacies of the police and other law enforcement agents, which compels law-abiding citizens to engage the services of vigilante groups as exemplified in the film, *Issakaba*.

The political brigandage of the Nigerian politicians and the gullibility of the followership have inspired films with political themes that satirize the buffoonery of the political actors. Among the films that capture this scenario are: *The Kingmaker* (Amata, 2002); *The Senator* (Benson, 2003); *Agogo Eewo* (brassbells) (Kelani, 2002); *Asiri Gomina Wa* (The secret of our Governor) (Durojaiye, 2007); and *Owo Okuta* (The law of Karma) (Ademola, 2008). Such films can be used to sanitize the decadent political environment.

Another theme that has attracted large followership to the Nigerian video film industry is religion. These films with religious bias are aimed at inculcating morals, winning souls for God and strengthening the weak in faith. Mike Bamiloye, of Mount Zion Faith Ministries, leads in this category with many titles in the market. He is closely followed by Helen Akpabio, of Liberty Gospel Ministries, who had her breakthrough when she collaborated with Teco Benson to produce *The Price* in 1991. Other titles that are box-office hits in the use of film for evangelism are: *End Time* (Nnebue, 1999); *Christian Marriage* (Onu, 1999) and *Rapture* (Amata, 2002).

Aside from these captivating themes, what further underscores the potentiality of Nigerian video films in image laundering is the large patronage they enjoy at the local, continental and international levels. Ayakoroma (2008) attests to this fact in the following lucid words:

The Nigerian Video Film Industry has captured the African film market as well as that of Blacks in Diaspora. Nigerian video films are watched all over the West African coast, in such a way that Nigerian video film actors and actresses enjoy the glamour of stardom in many countries.

This accessibility of Nigerian video films is further enhanced by airing of the films in English, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo in different channels of the providers of cable television. In the area of marketing, Ayakoroma (2008:281) also contends that, 'the development is such that, there are Nigerian video film outlets in America, Great Britain, Central European and Asian countries, and even on the Internet.'

With these facts, instead of looking at only the negative impact of these films, the government should explore their positive aspects towards improving Nigeria's national image. This can be done by engaging the services of the film producers with a grant to produce video films that would be tailored towards promoting and articulating cherished national values. This should be done taking into cognizance, the geopolitical zones of the country and in collaboration with the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) and National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) to streamline themes on national values. The Departments of Theatre Arts in Colleges of Education and the Universities could also be part of the project to moderate the commercial motivation of independent producers whose productions are normally determined by the financial returns from the box office.

The proposed media project should cost far less, with greater impact, than the huge sums of money being poured down the drain in the name of sloganeering or rebranding campaigns. It would be recalled that, the amount expended on 'The Heart of African' project that preceded rebranding in 2007 was 1.05 billion naira. 750 million naira was budgeted for the project in 2007 and 300 million naira in 2008, by the National Assembly. This colossal amount expended on image laundering for Nigeria



without any impact would have made a difference if pumped into film production.

Another genre of film production that could be explored for image laundering is the documentary. Producing documentary films on the vast human and material resources in Nigeria, portraying people, events and places, would go a long way in correcting the wrong perceptions about Nigeria within and outside the country. The documentary is not currently a popular genre in Nigerian video film industry, perhaps, because, it is not as commercially viable as the feature films that dramatize social realities. It must however be stressed that, projecting the ideal on the screen cannot totally solve the image problem of Nigeria. Governments at all levels should, in addition, create an enabling environment for the restoration of our cherished values in reality, for our film makers to capture on the screen.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has traced the emergence of the ever growing Nigerian video film industry to decolonize the Nigerian cinematographic art, and has chronicled the attempts of past leadership in Nigeria to re-orientate Nigerians to develop a sense of national pride. The paper also reviews the controversies trailing the kind of national image currently being portrayed in the video film, while its potentials in image laundering are highlighted. The paper concludes with a call on the government to intervene in the industry with a grant for image boosting film productions, and reinforce this by creating an enabling environment for Nigerians to purge themselves of anti-social vices staining the image of the country at home and abroad.

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