

Bashiru Akande, Ph.D
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan.

Paddling to the Rhythm: A Taxonomy of Nigerian Nollywood Films

Abstract

This paper examined the trends in the production of *Nollywood* films from its emergence in the early part of the 1990s through towards the end of the 2000s. It examined what informs the choice of themes and contents of films produced. The study was carried out in order to facilitate improved understanding and appreciation of *Nollywood* films. To achieve this, about two hundred films were previewed. Finding showed that 'Glamour films, Epic films, Reductive domestic films, films from adapted literary works, Comedy and religious films were the predominant feature of *Nollywood* films during the period. It also showed that both the Yoruba *Nollywood* film producers and the Ibo film producers using English medium of expression influence one another on the choice of film contents and subject matter, and that recycling syndrome was evident in the type of films produced. Another key finding was that the taste of the *Nollywood* audience kept changing thereby making it mandatory for *Nollywood* filmmakers to be dynamic in their thematic choice. Also, monotony of themes and subject matter as well as poor quality culminated in dwindling patronage of many films during the period. The paper concluded that both the *Nollywood* audience and *Nollywood* filmmaker influence each other. It then recommended that for *Nollywood* film to improve in terms of contents and quality, the taste of its audience must improve.

Introduction

The 1990s marked the dawn of video film industry in Nigeria and also marked the sudden emergence of film productions in Ibo language. *Living in Bondage* opened the door to other numerous films in Ibo and English language that were out to challenge the

age-long dominance of the Nigerian film industry by the Yoruba film practitioners. The dynamic taste of the audience changed with the advent of Ibo films that were subtitled in English. Even the most ardent followers of Yoruba films found watching Ibo films irresistible. The Ibo films then provided an alternative viewing experience for the audience who were already in a state of disillusion as to the quality of Yoruba films being produced by mainly marketers-turned-producers then.

The Ibo films at this period treated the communal essence of the traditional Ibo society. Like their Yoruba counterparts, many of their films reflected the cyclic relationship between the living, the dead and the unborn that is characteristic of many pre-colonial African societies.

Their themes were based on the treatment of social vices in the pre-colonial era as they affected the society, and on the identification of the age-long traditions of the Ibos. Some of the Ibo films then also tried to explain some mysteries of life from the Ibo world-view. Many traditions and customs of the Ibos were projected in the films. However, the Ibo films produced during this period were not thematically different from the Ogunde and his contemporaries' styles of production. The only difference was that of the background settings of the films.

The Taxonomy

Glamour Films of the 90s

As mentioned earlier, the Ibo films enjoyed some high degree of acceptance from the audience in its introductory stage. Little did the audience realise that the Ibo films were not radically different from that of the Yorubas in terms of thematic choice. Many of the enthusiastic Ibo film producers were literally producing the Ibo versions of past Yoruba films. Lack of innovation and zeal for improvement led to the audience becoming disenchanted with Ibo films and the tide changed as the audience diverted their viewing attention back to Yoruba films.

To redress this situation, most of the Ibo film producers changed gear as they started producing glamour films. Films like *Glamour Girls Parts 1 and 2*, *Die Wretched*, *Mega Fortune*, *Forever*, *Violated* etc are in this category. Due to the acceptance of this type of film by the

audience, the film industry became attractive to charlatans including marketers and other businessmen-turned artists. The quality of the films thus produced became so low that what the audience sees basically in such films were exotic and flashy cars, and exquisite interiors of the nouveau-riche. Little attention was paid to thematic relevance, social, economic and political development of Nigerian citizens as individuals and the nation at large.

The bandwagon effect of glamour films affected the Yoruba film producers as they bounced back to engage in the production of glamour films like their Ibo counterparts. This was done in order to remain relevant in the status quo. They abandoned the traditional cultural films and started producing films that highlighted the day-to-day realities of modern life in Nigeria. They focused on those themes that would be of interest to the youths who happened to be their major audience. Issues like money-making rituals, armed robbery, cultism, love and romance pervaded the screen. All the films produced during this period were produced with a special consideration for glamour. The most expensive cars in town were usually used as props while the most beautiful mansions were usually considered for locations.

Elegant dressing as well as exhibition of wealth and splendour became the order of the day. Watching such films made many wondered whether indeed there was poverty in the country. The films as produced then focused on people in the upper class of society strata; the rich, the nobles, the powerful and the mighties. Their travails, secrets and prospects formed the storyline in many of the films. Some parts of these films were also shot in Europe and other parts of the world. Examples of films produced during this period were *Owo Blow*, *London Lawa*, and *Ololade Mr. Money*.

As typical of the Nigerian films audience, they soon became bored by this monolithic approach to film production, repetition of themes and subject matter, plagiarism of successful western films and above all, production of films that would not in any way contribute to the eventual growth and development of the individual members of the audience in particular and the society at large. In fact, a school of thought was of the opinion that the films were only leading to increase in crime wave as youths tended to prefer the get-rich-quick-syndrome being exhibited in the films to virtuous

means of making money. Armed robbery and prostitution became the order of the day and it was as if the society, through the films, has legalized vices. Subsequently, dwindling patronage became noticeable as many producers and marketers started recording huge losses in the sales of their films and this forced many producers out of the market during this period.

Reign of Epic Films

Because of the gradual withdrawal of audience patronage from the glamour films, which basically highlighted the social vices as endemic in our body polity without any conscious attempt at proffering solutions to nip such malady in the bud, the need for an alternative viewing experience became inevitable. The practitioners, especially the Ibo film producers, were on hand to inject the much-needed vigour back into the industry with the introduction of epic films. Gab Okoye's *The Battle of Musanga* pioneered the Nigerian epic films of the 90s. The film, which was a historical presentation of the pre-colonial Ibo communities, provided the already exasperated audience with something to compensate them for their faithfulness to the industry and beamed hope that the industry could indeed be ransomed from the claws of charlatans-turned artists.

It is pertinent to note that epic films are usually very expensive to produce because of their production demands in terms of elaborate authentic period costumes and make up, panoramic settings, and large cast. In fact, *The Battle of Musanga* boasted of over 500 cast and the producer spent several millions of naira in realising it. It was what one could call the mega-budget film in the Nigerian context. The audience were so enthralled by this development that they went all out to have copies of the film when it was eventually released. However, the success of the film did not translate into financial fortune for the producer as pirates also had a field day distributing this film. Legend has it that they distributed and sold more copies than the producer did.

Major Nigerian epic films produced during this period projected the pre-colonial life of the Nigerians and their communal interactions. It x-rayed the traditional processes of administration of justice, and the virtuous heroic acts of the past as well as the position of the average man in the body polity during this period.

Other epic films dealt with projection of situations and events that were the hallmark of European colonisation of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. While some of the films showed the extent of resistance that the indigenes put forward to protest the colonisation as well as the colonial system of administration, other eulogised the positive aspect of colonialism in the areas of civilisation and spread of Christianity. Films in the latter category presented the pre-colonial era as the dark-age which was only illuminated with the arrival of the colonialists/imperialists. These euro-centric producers appeared to be more than the afro-centrics among the Ibo film producers during this period.

The intention of the euro-centric producers was to use film as a means of propagating the ideals of the Western world. They passively addressed the gradual indoctrination of the Africans by the colonials and passionately worked towards the edification of Christianity and western civilisation for the good things it has brought with it, i.e. how it has modified people's way of reasoning and provided a platform for a more peaceful and egalitarian society. Films from euro-centric producers succeeded in projecting the traditional Ibo people as cannibals, wicked, fetish and retrogressive. As soon as the Ibo film producers and marketers realised the potentials of epic films as a box office success, every producer started churning out epic films. In line with the 'Recycling Syndrome', there were many epic films during this period. In spite of this proliferation however, some notable films like *Igodo*, which has been criticised in some quarters as an unacknowledged adaptation of D.O.Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* into Ibo setting, *Isakaba* and *Vuga* were very successful with the audience.

It should be noted that epic films have been very successful with audience in different parts of the world. Epic films, also known as historical films have been used at various places and at different points in time to interpret the events of the past. It does not pretend that it is presenting authentic history but an artistic interpretation of history. Popular themes in historical films elsewhere in the world include the production of films on biblical stories; the popular battles of the First and the Second World Wars; experience of the colonialists in the colony; revolutionary struggle against colonisation and racism; as well as the scandals and assassinations of American

presidents from Abraham Lincoln, through Nixon to J.F. Kennedy etc.¹

Worthy of note is the fact that all these major historical events have been presented as artistic presentations, taking into consideration the make-belief antecedents of the film medium and its ability to magnify the smallest atom and minimised the biggest object on earth. Thus, many of the epic films produced in the country during this period had shortcomings that are peculiar to epic films elsewhere in the world as highlighted below.

Epics or historical films often rewrite history, suffering from inauthenticity, fictitious recreations, excessive religiosity, hard-to-follow details and characters, romantic dream worlds, ostentatious vulgarity, political correctness, and leaden scripts. Accuracy is sometimes sacrificed: the chronology is telescoped or modified, and the political/historical forces take a back seat to the personalization and ideological slant of the story (i.e., the 'poetic license of Oliver Stone's controversial JFK (1991) immediately comes to mind (The reign of Epic, 2003:1).

In spite of these shortcomings however, epic films still succeeded with the audience because of the amount of creative work that is infused into it. The only monster which struck the success of the epic films a big blow is the amount needed to successfully produce one. It is a mega-budget venture and those who do not have enough money to execute it were producing low quality films. Thus the audience again soon got tired of this low quality epic films as produced by the Ibo film producers and shifted to the Yoruba films producers. This also coincided with the time when major Yoruba film producers decided to join the bandwagon of epic film producers. Their belief was that if epic is the reigning thing, they too have a lot in stock.

The decline in the patronage of the Ibo epic films suddenly marked the rise of the ever-present but often recycled epic films of the Yorubas. Marketers and producers alike were not interested in any story that is not epic in outlook. Many well-researched and fantastic epic films were produced during this period. These included Even-Ezra's *Sango*, and Infinity Merchant's *Oduduwa*. The films were

acceptable to the audience but this acceptance was short-lived as the audience once again became disenchanted due to the activities of 'charlatans' that eventually joined the train and produced all sorts of baseless stories in the name of epic. Several films with wild claim of presenting historical account, myths and legends of the people were produced. Dramatists and storywriters started churning out materials that proclaimed every 'idiot' as a hero of his time.

Another dimension to this was the proliferation of the film market by money-bags who wanted the story of their grandfathers or ancestors produced as films for mere personal aggrandisement. This set of people also dictated, for some time, the kind of films that were produced as historical films. They supplied the 'producers/dramatists' with fabulous information of the history of their 'so-called grandfathers or ancestors' and left the producers/dramatists to fill in the gaps by projecting the character in question as a superhuman. Some of them were accorded heroic deeds that even surpassed the miracles of Jesus Christ!

Several producers and marketers alike sacrificed history and legends on the altar of commercialisation. Little or no research was done to confirm the authenticity of stories. What this meant was that production of some historical films was not borne out of the conscious effort of the producers and marketers alike to document history for posterity but based on other motives like financial gains, personal, or family aggrandisement. After watching such films either at the film house or as home videos, the audience often regretted their patronage and once again became disenchanted.

It is apposite at this juncture to note that not all historical films produced in the Yoruba film industry, fall into this category, because some film producers made conscious effort at documenting authentic history for posterity. Such films are identified by the choice of their historical materials, and the nearness of the story to historical account from other sources. Examples of such films are *Bashorun Gaa* and *Afonja*. Although these producers had good intentions, they too had few shortcomings in packaging their films:

The first shortcoming was based on the assumption that their audience are only Yoruba speaking people as if non-Yorubas would not be interested in the history of the Yorubas. Thus they treated most of the events in isolation of the prevailing circumstances

surrounding the events. Another shortcoming was the idea of over glorification of mystical power and juju. Human beings were placed at the mercy of the terrestrial elements as almost all inanimate objects one could find around were accorded mystical prowess. This was what fascinated many scholars including Babatunde Folarin to make the following observation;

In some cases, you get the impression that Nigerian cultures are all about voodoo and magic. Such productions tend to present Nigerians as a people who are not yet about to face the socio-political and socio-economic realities of an age of globalisation, a people who would rather worship, or rather, sentimentalize or bastardize nature than rationally exploit her for human happiness, a people who are more inclined to look for short-cuts to greatness (2003:7).

Reductive Domestic Films

The acceptance of the Yoruba epic films led to the dwindling patronage of Ibo epic films. This acceptance, coupled with low financial power, which came as a result of dwindling patronage, forced the Ibo film producers to resort to the production of 'reductive domestic films'. These films featured few actors with minimum of six and maximum of fifteen characters. They usually centre on a particular event in the life of a particular nuclear family. Major subject matters treated in such films include parental care, (as was the case with *Shattered Home* where the parents were too busy in their respective working place chasing money to the detriments of their children who were left at the mercy of a morally-bankrupt house girl), infidelity, polygamy as well as influence of in-laws and friends in the success or otherwise of a couple's marriage.

Another example of reductive domestic films that treated the aforementioned subject matters is *Dust to Dust* by Fred Amata, which discusses the issue of survival in relation to crime – a son of an initially able-bodied man who became crippled found crime as a means of surviving harsh economic conditions in the country. His ordeals as presented in the film, also highlighted the kind of hatred that a poor man can harbour even for his neighbour who fails to lend a helping hand in time of crisis. Also, *Daybreak*, which debuts Omotola Jolaade Ekehinde, depicts how survival could determine

the swinging pendulum of romance and love. It postulates that benevolent spirit can influence a knotty romantic situation. The heroine has to choose between her first love and a benevolent old man who has been taking good care of her and her mother. She chooses the latter in the process. Although this type of films were accepted, the level of acceptance was incomparable to the preceding types and the producers became wary of the limited potentials of these films as marketing success and thus have to develop an alternative means of wooing the audience to their side.

Films from Adapted Works

Another type of film that was produced during the period under review is films adapted from successful literary works like novels and plays. Examples of such literary works that found their ways into the screen are *Things Fall Apart*, *Koseegbe*, *Apakaland*, *O Le Ku*, *Omo Olokun Esin* to mention just a few. However, only few of the films conformed to the theory of adaptation as many of them were poor imitation of the literary works that gave birth to them.

Nigerian Comedy Films

Yoruba Film Comedians

The Yoruba comedians used to produce comedy films before the arrival of Nkem Owoh and Okey Bakasi in the film circuit. The likes of Babatunde Omidina a.k.a Baba Suwe, and Bolaji Amusan a.k.a Latin who were the offshoots of Moses Olaiya's (Baba Sala) school of acting were in the forefront of producing comedy films. Baba Suwe uses both the ludicrous and the ridiculous that are typical of low comedy to create laughter. His general appearance: costumes, his tar-painted face and other make-ups are enough to evoke laughter. His acting also conforms to the practice of the erstwhile renaissance commedia Dell'arte.

His tendency to manipulate traditional proverbs and idioms in a comical way is also one of his assets. Another reason why Babatunde Omidina and other comedians became famous with the audience was the tradition of featuring at least a comedian in virtually all Yoruba films. The trend in the Yoruba films since the time of *Omo Orukan* by Alawada Movies in 1989 was to create some comic characters either as gatemen, stewards, cooks or as drivers to bring

relief to a charged atmosphere with their ludicrousness and incongruity. The practice is still maintained till today as most marketers still insist that these comedians be included in the films before such films could be marketed. This then made it mandatory for film producers and directors to feature Baba Suwe, Latin, Dejo Tunfulu and a host of other comedians. Baba Suwe appears in almost three-quarters of films produced in Yoruba language during the period under review.

Initially there were many of them after Baba Sala. The list includes Sunday Omobolanle a.k.a. Aluwe, late Lukuluku, Pariolodo, Epo Kinkin, James Depe, and Aderupoko. However, some of them faded away gradually either as a result of reduction in the rate of their being casted by the producers or the audience preference for other comedians of their kinds. The few comedians that have withstood the test of time till this moment are the trio of Baba Suwe, Latin and Dejo Tunfulu, as well as Alaran and Eleso. Apart from featuring in numerous films, (more than many other film stars), they have also produced their own films and such films have always been successful on release. However, the films do not usually have 'second-hand value' and could not stand the test of time. People usually forget about such films as soon as new films treating critical subject matters come on board.

Ibo Film Comedians

The first major non-Yoruba comedian that has been very successful with his film is Nkem Owoh. A master of ceremony-turned actor, he has featured in, and produced several blockbusters like *Stupid*, *Okada Man*, and *Osoufia in London*. However, like other comedy films, they are only entertaining and are not in any way relevant to individual and societal development. Some people have even argued that those who patronised such films are low-income earners who were looking for avenues through which to escape the reality of the day. The films are like distractions, to take one's mind off the numerous socio-economic and political problems that are facing the common man in Nigeria. The films only provoke laughter, which is fast becoming a scarce commodity in the real life situation as pessimism becomes the order of the day. Some of the films that featured Nkem Owoh treat the adventure of Nkem as he loiters

around, tells lies, engages in nefarious activities and gets caught because of his stupidity. However the sustainability of his films like that of the Yoruba film comedians cannot be easily guaranteed.

It should be noted however, that his films are relatively cheap to produce as they usually feature very few characters, use limited settings with minimal decorations. In fact it is usually about the life of the lowest of the low in their immediate environment. Nkem makes use of available cheapest materials in his early films such as *Pam Pam*, which stars only Jide Kosoko, and *Yogo Pam Pam* which rides on the popularity of the Reggea artiste Daddy Showkey. These films are usually episodic and disjointed. However, he has become the darling of film producers as many of them struggle to feature him in their films. His recent films like *Osoufia*, and *Osoufia in London* that were shot in London are changing the low status of his film characters. Other comedians in that regard are Aki and Pawpaw as well as Sam Loco Efe. The success of Nkem Owoh films has influenced the production of other comedy films like *Dr. Thomas*.

Hausa Films

Brian Larkin (Haynes, 1997:118-119) traced the origin of Hausa films to three sources. These are the age-long Indian films that are very popular in the Northern part of Nigeria. From time past, Indian film has been one of the pastime of most Hausa men. Women are however exempted from this cinema viewing experience because cinema is seen as a place for indecent and immoral people. The presence of Karuwai (prostitute) in these cinema houses worsens the situation. The second source, according to Larkin, is the presence of several drama groups set up for the promotion and edification of Hausa culture. There are several drama groups in and around the core Northern states that produce drama for public consumption. However, with the development of video technology, such drama groups now package their drama into video and distribute this to people.

The third source is the emergence and popularity of Hausa love stories and novels known as 'Soyaya'. These novels have provided materials for subsequent films being produced in the area. Apart from that, many writers of Soyaya are now the scriptwriters being commissioned to write scripts for video films for *Kannywood* a name

given to Hausa films to give it a sort of recognition similar to that of *Nollywood*. This may be one of the reasons why most Hausa films are always based on love and romance. Like contemporary Indian films, Hausa videos often critique the erosion of cultural values associated with western materialism, while at the same time visually revelling in the spectacle of consumer goods and lifestyles that materialism brings about.

Above all else, the popular nature of Hausa videos has led to a concentration upon themes of romance and thus a close engagement with the styles of love present in Indian films-by far the most important visual medium dealing with the theme of love. Notable among Hausa filmmakers as identified by Larkin are Ado Ahmad a novelist, Aminu Argungu, producer of *Haukan Mutum*, Ibrahim Mandawari the producer of *Gimbiya*, Fatima Auwalu, M. Sabos and Gagare Abdulkarim Mohammed who produced *Waiwaye Adon Tafiya*.

Religious Films

Nigerians are by all standards very religious and religion remains a determining factor in the success or otherwise of some films produced by Ibo film producers. These films use religious sentiment to attract large population of Christians. With the success of many of Helen Ukpabio's films, many Ibo film producers consider it an incomplete job, a film with no religious undertone. Also the likes of Mount Zion Ministry of the *Agbara Nla* fame, Elvon Jarret Productions and Kay Technical Films are in the vanguard of Christian films in the South Western parts of Nigeria. They produce films like *The Great Mistake*, *Agba Wolii*, *The Story of My Life*, to mention just a few. It was only in recent times that few people are coming out to produce Islamic religion films but these have not enjoyed as much patronage as one would have expected probably due to the producers inability to publicise the films. Like the Christian religion films, the triumph of good over evil is the hallmark of all Islamic films. Films by Dash Waves like *Omo Eleha* and *Ziko the Radical* are in this category.

In conclusion, it is glaring from the aforementioned that majority of films produced during the period under review served other purpose than individual and societal developments. Many of them

have linked us up with our distant past while others seem to attempt to bring us closer to God. Many films reviewed focused largely on domestic issues rather than issues of national importance. Few films however, have addressed social and political issues of the day in a satirical way. Films like *The Grasshopper* which tries to capture Abachas' reign of terror, *Saworo Ide* and *Agogo Ewo* that satirised the transition from civilian to military rule in Nigeria and the efforts of the then Obasanjo administration to rid the nation of corrupt politicians respectively are in this category. One thing that is clear is that the taste of the audience is ever changing and recycling syndrome has a negative effect on the development of *Nollywood* films. For *Nollywood* films to sustain its audience, the filmmakers have to ensure dynamism in their approach to film production. Since audience reaction as demonstrated through patronage influence the film that sells, *Nollywood* audience need to improve their taste for quality films in order to propel *Nollywood* film producers to produce quality films that will meet the yearnings and aspirations of Nigerians in particular and its international audience in general.

References

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2. Ibid
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4. Haynes, J. 1997, *Video Film in Nigeria*, 118-119.