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Towards the Nationalisation of *Nollywood*: Looking back and looking forward – A Reading of the Thematic and Economic Trends

Abstract

The contradiction in its emergence in the early 1990s has helped to contextualize the lack of enthusiasm which greeted the Nigerian video film industry from the ashes of a colonial legacy and structure. Linked to emerging urban popular culture (Okome and Haynes), the now transnational cultural product (Adejunmobi) seems to have left the universe of a national cinema behind, opting to be a voice of the African continent. For two decades now, ingenuity and prolific creativity in **Nollywood**'s march towards becoming a cinema industry have never been in doubt even though life for the vast majority of the population remains unchanged.

Using the example of Nigeria's golden film era and the recent video revolution and building on the work of Jonathan Haynes, Onookome Okome and Moradehun Adejunmobi, I intend in this paper to discuss certain features of what constitutes a national identity for an industry, and to identify from the past, present while attempting to project into the future efforts and conditions aimed at enabling the nationalisation of this phenomenon. To be specific, this contribution to the larger discussion on the national tenor of Nollywood will synoptically focus on the thematic and economic trends to describe this cultural productivity from the indigenous landscape to the global.

The paper, without being ambiguous however leaves the reader to draw his own conclusion on whether the industry can become a true national patrimony.

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Introduction

I think the theme of this Workshop is militaristically political, either deliberate or unintentional. What I cannot ascertain is whether the organisers realised this or it is my own reading. I say this because as one of those born after independence and during the civil war, I can hardly see any sign or evidence of Nigeria's metamorphosis or development into a national entity, even as she prepares to ***celebrate***?, and I say this with a question mark, her golden jubilee. We are still daily confronted with fratricidal and internecine wars which dot the landscape like the Bubonic plague of ancient narratives – all in the name of self-determination.

In all of this, one art that has made frantic attempts at uniting or preferably, *nationalising* the country is the motion picture. From the present structure or structurelessness of the sector, it is evident that each region or geo-political zone prefers to answer its father's name. I will not bore you with the raging debate on why we chose to adopt the name *Nollywood* from an over-zealous American columnist, and the various *deforestation* efforts to carve a *wood* for each of the industries springing up across since the year 2000, the magical year. These critics or cynics forget that the nomenclature NIGERIA itself was equally a gift from a British consort. Why we have not bothered to change the name like Burkina Faso still baffles me.

I.

The term "national cinema" is hard to define, and its meaning is debated by film scholars and critics. This conference is one of such platforms to find another definition for 'National cinema', which is a term sometimes used in film theory and film criticism to describe the films associated with a specific country. According to Choi, a film may be considered to be part of the "national cinema" of a country based on a number of factors, such as the country that provided the financing for the film, the language spoken in the film, the nationalities or dress of the characters, and the setting, music, or cultural elements present in the film (2010). To define a national cinema, some scholars emphasize the structure of the film industry and the roles played by "...market forces, government support, and cultural transfers..." (O'Regan).

Now to the heart of the matter

Few film industries have had quite as much impact in the academy, the world of visual communication and within the purview of national cinema in so short a span of evolution as *Nollywood*.For about two decades now, beginning with the production of *Aje Ni Iya Mi* – which many thought was just a child's play, without looking back, *Nollywood* has in the words of Haynes and Okome ... "redefined what popular culture means, and in doing so, has contested the boundaries that separated audience and actor ever since". Is Nollywood a National Cinema in the same vein as the French, Polish, German, Canadian, British, Australian national cinemas? This question begs desperately for an answer. A quick appraisal may perhaps yield pseudo-answers.

II. Films in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the Indigenous Landscape

The first indigenous film, produced in 1970, by Fed Films Limited, a Lebanese-Nigerian joint venture, was titled *Son of Africa.* However, it lost this historical credit to *Kongi's Harvest* produced same year, due to a dispute on the strength that the Nigerian contribution was too minimal, while the bulk of financial backing was from the Lebanese. *Kongi's Harvest,* Nigeria's first independent feature, an adaptation of Wole Soyinka's play of the same title, was another joint venture between Francis Oladele's Calpenny Nigeria Films Limited, Herald Production, an American Company, and Omega Film, a Swedish Company, directed by Ossie Davies, a black American. Both Oladele and Davies have been credited as the pioneer indigenous filmmaker, and pathfinder for Nigeria's indigenous films, respectively.

The film, described by Opubor *et al* (1979:6) as one of the significant feature length films made by private filmmakers, after *Moral Disarmament* (1957), and *Bound for Lagos* (1962) produced for the Federal government, and *Culture in Transition* (1963) produced by Shell-BP of Nigeria Limited, was an affirmation of the complementary nature of the stage and the screen in Soyinka's assertion that

> ... the two are interrelated and mutually complement each other so often, both in practice and theory, that new comers to the cinema, which include all of us, tend very often to transpose the form of theatre directly into film, with of course, very stagey, static films (1979:98).

Oladele went on to produce into film, an adaptation of two novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, by Chinua Achebe, as *Bullfrog in the Sun* in 1971; the title has however been changed to reflect the original title, *Things Fall Apart*, one of the novels (Ukadike, 1994:145), which recently enjoyed world-wide celebration as an authentic literary classic from Africa, note, not a Nigerian national literature. Sanya Dosunmu's *Dinner with the Devil* equally falls within this category.

Film production in English or/and Hausa followed the attempts mentioned above, with buoyant support from the government of the day. Examples include *Shehu Umar* (1976), by late Adamu Halilu, based on a novel of the same title written by the first Prime Minister of Nigeria, late Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, produced as Nigeria's official film entry for the 2nd Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77, and Halilu's own *Kanta of Kebbi* (1978), copiously sponsored by the Sokoto State Government (Haynes, 1995:7).

The evolution history of indigenous film industry will be incomplete without a mention of Ogunde, the man who came to be known as the "doyen of the Nigerian theatre." His contributions to the growth of theatrical nationalism on the continent dated back to 1945, when he launched the African Music Research Party, as a veritable platform. This development coincided with the making of the film, *Sanders of the River* (1935), and the idea of an African fight-back in the motion picture industry described by Ofeimun (2003:4-5) as "a movement of dissent similar to that of Negritude in Literature." This consciousness, according to Ekwuazi (1987), prepared the ground for the eventual transition of the film culture (borrowing its personnel, technique and plot from the stage), to the "stage of maturation.

Although he was not the first theatre practitioner to transit into filmmaking, Ogunde's foray was not only seminal and influential but also instrumental to the critical assessment of standard in the

Nigerian film. With *Aiye* (1979), directed by Ola Balogun, *Jaiyesimi* (1980), *Aropin N'Tenia* (1982), *Ayanmo* (1988), and *Mr. Johnson* (1990), (the last film he co-produced and acted in before his transition), Ogunde concentrated on the thematic exploration, from the metaphysical perspective, of the Manichean struggle of good against evil. His use of *juju*, traditional magic, which became an important element in his films, was to influence the home video films of both Yoruba and Igbo flavour, which came to prominence in the early 1990s.

III. Towards a National Cinema: An Ethni-thematic or Ethnimatic Overview

A theme, according to Farker, implies the linearity or extension of a work in a way that other subject matter do not. He further asserts that:

> Theme may refer to those repeated parts of a subject which control aspects of a work which is perceived as formal as well as conceptual. Theme is therefore, a more concrete and formalistic term with structural implications (Farker, 1991:247-249).

In the same vein, Barakat (1975) once observed that "there is no theme that could not be presented in an artistic and creative form". In 1975, Ola Balogun, with his Afrocult Foundation, produced the first Nigerian film shot in indigenous tongue –Ibo – *Amadi*, subtitled in English, and thus, clinched the honour as the "midwife of the transitional phase" from stage to film, of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre groups (Haynes, 1995:9) as reflected in his second feature film, *Ajani Ogun* (1976), which is on record as Black Africa's first musical. The film, using Yoruba language, had the late Duro Ladipo National Theatre Company as the central cast, and served as the motivating factor for the itinerant travelling theatre practitioners, "pursuing their audience to the remotest parts of their base", (Jeyifo, 1984) ambitious to use film as an extension of their practice on stage and on television, and enhance their profit. With the projectors and film reels, practitioners moved from village to village, hamlet to hamlet, entertaining local audience. Crammed in a *mammiwagon*, the producer-director and his entire family, move from one place to another (Okome, 1995:154).

Balogun's efforts on celluloid include: *Alpha* (1974), *Muzikman* (1976), *Black Goddess* (1978), *Cry Freedom* (1981), and *Money Power* (1982), among others. He brought an intellectual perspective into the symbiosis between theatre and film in his collaboration with Moses Adejumo Olaiya (Baba Sala) and the late Hubert Ogunde as the director of their initial films, thereby gaining access to an enormous, enthusiastic, and unalienated audience which simply followed their beloved actors into the new medium of cinema.

Eddie Ugbomah, another filmmaker of repute apart from Balogun, pitched his tent with thematic pre-occupation of socio-political dimension, ranging from violence, corruption, lost dignity and others as a critique of neo-colonial and externally-motivated Nigerian problems. Beginning with *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* (a notorious robber), in 1976, he went on to *The Boy is Good* (1978), *The Mask* (1979), *Oil Doom* (1980), *Bolus '80* (1982), *Death of a Black President* (1983) – based on the assassination of Nigeria's most popular military ruler, General Murtala Muhammed on February 13, 1976, *Vengeance of the Cult* (1984), *The Great Attempt* (1990) which was banned by the film censors (Ofeimun, 2003:6). Although an Aboh indigene of Delta State, Ugbomah is based in Lagos. He responded to the prevailing trend dictated by acceptability factor of the day and shifted his language to Yoruba for which he has such films like *Esan A Ke* (1984), *Apalara* (1986), *Omiran* (1988), and *Toriade* (1992), (Okome and Haynes, 1995:138-139) to his credit. Only recently, he produced *Black Gold* (2004).

Ladi Ladebo, another filmmaker of note has either produced or has written scripts for *Countdown to Kusini* (1976), *Bisi, Daughter of the River* (1977), *Vendor* (1988), *Eewo* (1989), the last of which swept most of the prizes at the 1st National Film Festival in 1992, and recently *Heritage* (2003). His films deal with social themes from diverse perspectives.

In all these efforts, while it could be said that they were trying to evolve a national cinema, Nigeria's first generation filmmakers popularized the folkloric film genre, influenced by and relying on the robust tradition of the popular travelling theatre–where it existed-with such characteristics as the use of indigenous Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa languages to communicate, rather than the official language – English. The films were based on improvisation and story-telling;

and are steeped in the popular myths, legends, traditional moral-codes and what has been described as the "pre-industrial, pre-capitalist animist-pantheistic sensibilities of pristine Yoruba culture" (Jeyifo, 1984). Malomo (1993:8), taking the analysis further, contends that the advent of television was an important factor which encouraged indigenous filmmaking. He describes the folkloric film as a

> ...cinematic genre closely related to an indigenous theatre (with) social and cultural significance for the developing film industry in the country (Malomo, 1993:1).

IV. The economic paradigm and the emergence of *Nollywood*

Nollywood came about by accident. In 1992, Kenneth Nnebue, a Nigerian trader based in Onitsha, was trying to sell a large stock of blank videocassettes he had bought from Taiwan. He decided that they would sell better with something recorded on them, so he shot a film called 'Living in Bondage' about a man who achieves power and wealth by killing his wife in a ritualistic murder, only to repent later when she haunts him. The film sold more than 750,000 copies and prompted legions of imitators. (*Economist,* 2006). Thus began *Nollywood*. Nnebue had formerly invested in a Yoruba video film, *Aje Ni Iya Mi*, for the late Ishola Ogunsola (I Sho Pepper) in 1988, to the tune of N2,000.00 (two thousand naira only), making hundreds of thousand back (Haynes, 2000:55) while he paid pittance to a few of the actors. This development of ill-treatment spurred some Yoruba artists like Kosoko, Salami, Gbenga Adewusi and Muyi Aromire into renting video equipment and launching their own productions (Ayorinde and Okafor, 1998:29).

The films that became synonymous with *Nollywood*, the home video industry in its first decade of existence therefore had pioneers among the Yoruba. However, Osha observes that they lost this enviable position to the Igbo filmmakers due to their lack of business drive, even though their commitment was not in doubt. One limitation the former had to contend with was the regional orientation to their output which short-circuited their appeal (Osha, 1998:49). A radical trend was however introduced by the Igbo

producers, galvanizing the erstwhile docile industry, through the profuse sub-titling (in English), improved budgets, and technical innovation, to prove that they meant real business of home video production. Soon, after, their Yoruba counterparts were to follow suit.

V.

It is pertinent to note that with the national economy in a stable, buoyant shape, and the cost of production within reach, Nigeria's early filmmakers recorded about one hundred and twenty (120) 16mm features films between 1962 and 1990, an average of 3 features per year, according to Okome (1995:62). However, arising from the downturn in the economy and the yearning of the citizenry for a different form of entertainment, having been weaned on the milk of the TV soap operas of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), which has its precursor in the tradition of *Play House* on the old WNTV (Western Nigeria Television, established in 1959), the home video phenomenon emerged, with such commercial vitality and popularity, embraced by all and sundry, especially, housewives.

Soon after inception, taking over from television, an increasingly diverse and powerful cultural energy began to flow into the new industry with the result that a hope for its survival and tremendous growth and mutation was assured, in just a little over a decade of its emergence, according to Haynes (1995).

Nigerian video film, however, developed independent of Western support and funding–the films have been produced almost exclusively with Nigerian money. In the same vein, few international distribution channels for Nigerian video films have been opened. As a result, local distributors have supported Nigerian video films financially, and the content tends towards regional and local cultural preferences (Muller, 2004). These videos, therefore, respond to local market forces and in fact pander to local tastes in very specific ways. 21 And as much as any other factor, the economic success of this industry is a result of a production and distribution system that completely bypasses the movie theatre distribution system.

VI. *Nollywood*: Looking forward to a National Cinema

While one may argue that the films from *Nollywood* do not have a long history, beginning only from the late eighties, it is a given that the industry is rich in activity, landmarks and personages that altogether present a very fecund and bright landscape and an even brighter kaleidoscope of future flowering. The recourse to what I have described elsewhere, (Ademiju-Bepo, 2005) through Bamidele (2000), as *visual literature* in the home video syndrome, therefore, is both an assurance of better means of livelihood and continuing relevance, visibility and viability of particular traditions together with the emergence of novel practices. The dynamics of tradition and change affects them, and has spurred the cultural interpreters of our collective heritage on to take full advantage of the creative symbiosis of literature and motion picture.

In her discussion of the thematic thrust of Igbo films, Thomas notes three levels of concentration. While the Igbo films lack the folkloric or nuptial background and colouration of the Yoruba films, she contends that they are not less cultural, social or political (Thomas, 1995:51). Social realism, she argues, has permeated the Igbo video films, pioneered by Nnebue in 1992 (*Living in Bondage*), and carried on into *Taboo* (1993); *Betrayal* (1995); *Frame Up* (1995); *Nneka, the Pretty Serpent* (1996) among others.

Laoye (1997), writing on the rise of the Yoruba film, asserts that works based on contemporary themes in the video films take on cosmopolitan air, with love, intrigue, wealth, *juju*, desperation, etc., as pre-occupation, on the one hand, and higher 'contemporariness' with espionage, gangsterism, violence, murder and so on, on the other hand. This contemporaneity underscores the popularity of the Nigerian video film industry, for which a vast domestic, rather than global market has been found, based on the variety of styles, forms, and themes, as well as languages of expression, in the contention of both Haynes and Okome (1997:21). Taking their argument further, they assert that the home video films, give an image of the Nigerian nation, from both the economic and cultural perspectives, while reflecting the productive forces. Thus, the audience cultivated by the emergent video trend, has become such that helps, symbiotically, to enlarge or extend its dramatic or

thematic paradigm.

The elite, the illiterate and the literate will continue to constitute the dynamic audience chain for the home video and this can only serve to help the development of a new trend in nationalising contemporary Nigerian motion picture as a timely response to the yearnings of a new age (of technology) and the desire for audio-visual entertainment.

Seven

National Cinema: An Alternative for *Nollywood's* Quest for Global Relevance

There are many scholars and students who have come to see film as a cultural product and a universal phenomenon, which subsumes a cultural base and succeeds only when it affects the social reality of the people with whom it directly communicates, as there are interpretations of the phenomenon. Osofisan for instance, observes that this phenomenon grew out of "a hitherto neglected and subsidiary technology... harnessed with such naïve inventiveness... till the (ir) products have almost completely displaced the far more sophisticated, far more technically competent products of Hollywood and Bollywood" (2006).

Our writers are not only good storytellers, but they have proved for the most part to be story-tellers concerned not primarily with material gratification, but rather, with overall wellbeing of the community. They propagate our cultural heritage, but without necessarily glorifying superstition or on the other hand, deliberately demonising our local religions and customs. The Nigerian video film phenomenon however has nothing of the technical polish of African Cinema. It does not play by any of the Western cinematic rules; in fact it ignores them completely. It does not take its imaginative or ideological direction from West, and it is not tied by the strictures of foreign capital investment. It is this fact that allows Nigerian video film to maintain its authentic African voice. Paradoxically ignored or denigrated by most cinema theorists, Nigerian video film should begin to signal the emergence of a unique and autonomous Nigerian cultural form – an exciting cultural moment beyond the characterisation.

This is therefore a clarion call to our filmmakers in *Nollywood*, the cultural interpreters and chroniclers of our collective Muse, to give the screen a national cinema that is original, refreshing, and enduring. These films should use symbolic storytelling themes and tropes pulled from our extremely long tradition of oral history. This is a veritable legacy for African films which can be *nationalised*. The lessons for *Nollywood* from this, invariably, are many and diverse. No more the era of shallow and uninspiring plots, of dull stories and insipid dialogue, of trivial and sensational themes, of relentless celebration of dark rituals and diabolical cults, of mixed diet of grotesque murders and cacophonous chants and bizarre incantations, of pedestrian and grotesque characterisation of a Mohammed being made a gateman, an Ekaette or Idongesit as house girl or houseboy, a Chukwudi or Emeka as importer and exporter, and a Fayemiwo as herbalist – which in the creative consideration of the writers and directors gives their story a national outlook.

In lieu of a Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked briefly at the major directions in Nigerian filmmaking where we see beautiful films that are attempting to find a voice for indigenous culture in the national or global arena. They deal with African themes and utilize the African story-telling tradition. They are technically advanced and fit comfortably within the canon of Western cinema critique. For just this reason, however, these films seem to have actually lost their authentic Nigerian voice.

By adopting the Western model of filmmaking, playing by Western cinematic rules, they subjugate the actual Nigerian experience to a representation of the African experience in order to make it palatable to a Western audience. These films have a great deal of value in educating a Western audience to traditional African culture and mythology, but fall short of raising Nigerian Cinema to the status of a sovereign and equal visual culture - they represent a visual culture colonized by the West.

Energized by the wishes of the people and propelled by their social and cultural desires, *Nollywood*, like Hollywood, should begin to realize the significance of manufacturing dreams that people want to hear and see. Today, the industry represents a fast rising independent visual culture – outside of technology, that is, which

the world cannot but take note of. The same world has already acknowledged the creativity of many of our writers evidenced by their literary chronology. What about: the structures, the financing for the film, the language spoken in the film, the nationalities or dress of the characters, and the setting, music, or cultural elements present in the film? Or even market forces, government support, and cultural transfers? Does the presence or absence of any of these factors seek to define *Nollywood* as a national cinema?

Although Haynes (2000:4) has stressed that "the videos may not give us what we thought we wanted, but...They offer the strongest, most accessible expression of contemporary Nigerian popular culture." According to him, they are a prime instance of the interpretation of the global and the local through the international commerce in cultural forms. The truism of this assertion is debatable, I want to submit.

The Nigerian video film phenomenon therefore has nothing to lose by utilising the prodigious output from this industry of note as it simultaneously cannot afford to ignore them completely, towards the nationalisation of *Nollywood.*

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