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## **The Other Nollywood: The Documentary**

### **Abstract**

Against the background of one specific documentary film (*Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story*), this paper looks generally at the documentary film in Nigeria. By taking a backward glance o'ever travelled roads, the first section of the paper looks at the documentary tradition within the structural evolution of Nollywood. The second section anatomizes the documentary genre; and in the third section, this anatomy becomes the basis for the interrogation of the documentary film under study. The paper concludes with the argument that the documentary films of the period do indicate the rise and rise of the documentary film in Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

The name, Nollywood, has obviously stuck-for good; and it has since come to be widely accepted to refer to one or both of:

- (a) the Nigerian film industry; and
- (b) the Nigerian film.

The basic assumption is that the industry is defined essentially by the feature film. For more often than not, when people talk of the Nollywood film, the film in question is the feature film. The documentary film, however, is really no less a vital component of the industry. The Nigerian censor may release two feature films per day for public screening as opposed to one documentary film in a fortnight – this lopsidedness in favour of the feature film has not in any way resulted from any *structural* bias: the structure of the industry as it exists today is neither in bias for nor against any film type/genre.

The documentary, ironically, is the older of the two forms – and the more underdeveloped. In “Somehow, the Documentary Survived”, the preface to the first edition of my earlier work, *The Television/Film Documentary – A Production Resource Book* (1996:7-8) I have tried to succinctly capture the chequered history of the documentary in Nigeria:

The Colonial Film Unit (CFU) specialized in the documentary. By effectively integrating intent, content and technique, the documentary became, in the hands of the CFU, a veritable means of socialization and cohesion – within the colonial frame work, of course. And a fleet of mobile cinema vans not only ensured that these films were *taken* to the people; these vans, in effect, made the films the cultural property of all Nigerians.

The Federal Film Unit inherited the documentary tradition from the CFU but without that characteristic fusion of intent, content and technique. And without that intrinsic co-ordination of production with distribution and exhibition: production, as it were, became an end in itself.

The consequence of all this seriously stunted the development of the documentary. In the first place, the production technique degenerated to a stereotype, with the overall effect becoming, inevitably, boring to the extreme. For instance, at the 1st National Film Festival (1992), *all* the documentaries entered by the Federal and State Film Units looked as if they had been produced, scripted, directed and edited by the same group of people.

No less crucial is the perceived relationship between the documentary, on the one hand, and the people and the government, on the other. The more divorced the documentary became from the people, the more closely it became associated with the government – to the extent, in fact, of sharing the political (mis) fortunes of the government. In our peculiar circumstances where, ever since Independence, virtually every government has been discredited and kicked out of power by the succeeding government, the documentaries have always gone into discredit and oblivion with the government under whose auspices they had been made. One quick example should suffice here: under President Shehu Shagari (1979-1983), the Federal Film Unit made a host of documentaries on the Green Revolution, the government's pet



agricultural policy. The military *putsch* that separated the regime from power consigned all the documentaries into oblivion, to gather dust in some government vault.

There is hardly any destruction which the exigency and contingency of Nigerian political life has not wrought on the documentary. They have – and here I am trying to paraphrase an authority on the British film industry – trampled on it, kicked it around, decapitated it and hauled it out by the very roots. On the other extreme, they have even tried to satiate it (the documentary, that is) to death by the provision of abundant production capital resources. But, somehow, it has always proved resilient; it has always managed, somehow, to survive – like the British film industry which has, aptly, been likened to the dandelion.

And today, though stunted, the documentary has continued to grow, thanks, largely, to the combination of the following structural factors: a fast growing television industry; a steady growth in the number of independent television/film producers and directors; and the growth in the number of polytechnics and universities where the documentary is a vital complement to the courses in broadcasting and film.

By the second edition of the book (2009),<sup>2</sup> two other significant factors had emerged to add value to the widening interest in the documentary film in the country – and these are:

- (a) the increasing number of film festivals in the country; and
- (b) the increasing number of NGOs and other institutions to whom the documentary is a handy and effective tool for advocacy (p.9)

In the intervening period between 1996 and 2009, the most successful documentaries licensed by the censor for public screening include:

- (a) *Uncut, Playing with Life*
- (b) *Nigerian Cinema: Pioneers and Practitioners*
- (c) *Till Death Do Us Part*
- (d) *Child Trafficking in Nigeria*
- (e) *Bariga Boys*
- (f) *Innovating for Africa*; and
- (g) *Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story*.

Even the most cursory screening of all seven documentaries



cannot but reveal the following:

- (a) Three of the documentaries (*Child Trafficking*, *Bariga Boys* and *Innovating for Africa*) are structured wholly on the voice-over narrative technique.
- (b) Three others (*Uncut*, *Playing with Life*, *Till Death Do Us Part* and *Defence of a Mandate: the Oshiomole Story*) contain the voice-over within large sequences of dramatization.
- (c) Only one (*Nigerian Cinema: Pioneers and Practitioners*) completely does away with the voice-over, using, instead, a diegetically present anchor who ties up the disparate sequences together; and
- (d) All seven documentaries exhibit a nuanced awareness of intent, content and structure. Perhaps none of the documentaries does so better than *Defence of a Mandate: the Oshiomole Story*. More than all the others, also, it raises the issue of the *documentariness* of the documentary genre.

### **Propaganda is any Documentary made by my Enemy!<sup>3</sup>**

On-line, there is a growing body of literature on the definition of the documentary. For instance, in his on-line essay on "Defining Documentary Film," Henrik Juel<sup>3</sup> assembles three clusters of 25 points to consider in the definition of the documentary. All the body of literature have this in common: they take off from, react to, or, in some way, return to those five classical definitions of the documentary – which Roy Paul Madsen<sup>4</sup> has assembled:

- (a) 'a creative treatment of actuality' – John Grierson
- (b) "a selective dramatization of facts in terms of their human consequences" – Forsyth Hanly
- (c) "a film, usually non-fiction, in which the elements of dramatic conflict are provided by ideas and political or economic forces" – William Van Dyke
- (d) "those (films) that deal with historical, social scientific or economic subjects, either photographed in actual occurrence or re-enacted, and where the emphasis is more on factual content than on entertainment" – The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; and
- (e) "those (films) which reproduce life in all its manifestation – the life of man, of animals, of nature – without the assistance



of professional actors or studios and of condition that the film represents a free artistic creation. We are led to name this genre *films of life*" – Jean Benoit Levy.

This definition provides the basis for Madsen's conceptualization of the documentary in terms of the following five characteristics:

- (a) *Subject Matter*: 'the documentary film is concerned with the factual aspects of the lives of men, animals and other living creatures, unleavened by fictional concepts or techniques'
- (b) *Concept*: 'the documentary is a drama of ideas whose thrust is toward social change, not aesthetic satisfaction, entertainment or even education as it is usually defined.'
- (c) *Purpose*: 'the documentary is intended to alert the viewer to some aspect of reality that should be his legitimate concern, or serious interest, and to illuminate a social problem. The purpose of this genre is best defined in terms of its classic goals: to crystallize public sentiments on an issue, to inspire initiative, to develop a sense of will to act decisively in the public interest and to establish standards of civilized behaviour. It is an attempt to persuade the viewer to act on the solution of today's problems today, with the intention that any given film be discarded when it has achieved its intended behavioural goal of an improvement in some aspect of a nation's life'.
- (d) *Theme*: 'the classic documentary is concerned with what happens to people – it is an emotional statement of the facts in terms of their human consequences'.
- (e) *Technique*: 'the documentary film is a motion picture record of real people living real events, photographed and edited to present the closest possible approximation of their true relationships'.<sup>4</sup>

All this raises the issue of: truth/credibility; objectivity/subjectivity; bias/mediation; and, of course, the relationship of the propaganda to the documentary.

Joris Ivens, drawing from his long string of documentaries, insists that "three minutes of untruthfulness in an hour-long documentary makes the whole film lose credibility" for "your audience will no longer trust you".<sup>5</sup> But *truth* here must not be taken to be mutually exclusive with bias/subjectivity. Ivens draws



a beautiful analogy between the documentary filmmaker and the witness in court: though the witness swears to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, he does not swear not to be biased/subjective in his account/interpretation: "Many people take it for granted that all documentary films are objective. This sounds odd to me. The term may be ambiguous, but to me, documents and records are quite different things. Do we demand objectivity from witnesses in court? No. The only demand is that all evidence must be unquestionably true just like a witness swearing on the Bible"<sup>5</sup>

The documentary film, *David Holtzman's Diary*, provides, perhaps, the most apt definition of documentary truth. "Truth", it says, in its opening statement, "is 24 frames per second" – 24 frames per second being the speed at which the film passes through the (cine) projector. Taken against the balance of evidence in the film, the fact that every aspect of the film is mediated, that even the role of David Holtzman is acted, the peculiarity of documentary truth becomes clearer. Come to think of it, perhaps the documentary filmmaker is no more than any of those six blindmen of Hindostan who went to see the elephant!

Mediation/distortion in the documentary/news can result from any of the following:

- (a) Giving prominence to events of no real importance and the superficial or the irrelevant becoming interwoven with facts of real significance.
- (b) When news is cobbled together from random facts and presented as a whole or partial truths are assembled to form the appearance of a complete truth.
- (c) When facts are presented in such a way as to cause misinterpretation by implication, where the implicit conclusions drawn by the audience are favourable to particular interest.
- (d) When events are presented in a way that stirs unfounded or exaggerated doubts or fears with the aim of conditioning subsequent action by individuals or even whole communities or governments; and
- (e) When silence is maintained on facts or events presumed to be of interest to the public.<sup>6</sup>



But the mediation is not peculiar to the documentary/news programme – it is intrinsic to the screen; and it results from three productional factors:

- (a) the imperative for the condensation of time: from the time Oshiomole enters the race to the time the supreme court declares him the legitimate winner of the election and to his swearing in as the governor – in reality, all this takes over a year; but the film has had to reduce it to barely a little over an hour.
- (b) The process of (pre) selection; some issues/facts have been adjudged by the filmmaker to be more important than others – and have, therefore, been selected; and
- (c) the process of composition: the star of the documentary is Oshiomole – and camera position in the film consistently favours him.

All the foregoing inevitably lead to two interlinked questions:

- (a) the level of mediation – what is the level of mediation in *Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story*?
- (b) Honesty – how honest/truthful is the documentary?

We can answer these questions only by interrogating

- (a) the film's video and audio components because these constitute its channels of information; and
- (b) the structure of the film – because it is this that shapes the video and audio.

The point has been made earlier, that it is in the nature of the documentary film while telling the truth to be nonetheless biased, to have a distinct point of view. It is also in the nature of the genre to organically and discernibly integrate its intent, content and structure. On account of all these peculiarities, the documentary has come to be bracketed within the persuasive media – i.e., those media:

- (a) that employ art and entertainment as vehicles for persuasion
- (b) whose technique “attempts to influence the opinion, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of a group, in order to benefit a sponsor”<sup>7</sup> and
- (c) whose appeals “persuade not through the give-and-take of argument and debate, but through the manipulation of symbols and of our most basic human emotion”<sup>8</sup>



It is interesting how (a), (b) and (c) above are invariably implicated in the definition of the propaganda film. Equally interesting is the seamless manner in which elements of technique which have, as it were, been patented by the propaganda film, appear in the documentary. Among such elements, like I have endeavoured to show in another earlier study<sup>9</sup> are:

- (a) *Heavy reliance on the visual*: The propaganda film, in the manner of all films, **shows** and **tells**; but it shows far more than it tells. For the simple reason of its nuanced awareness that the viewer tends to 'make emotional decisions based upon what (is seen) at so low an awareness level that (the viewer is) frequently unaware of coming to a decision until it has been made<sup>25</sup>. So, effective propaganda films employ the video and audio components in the ratio of 10:1 – in fact, such films are usually more than 90% visual.<sup>10</sup>
- (b) *Image composition to favour or disfavour the subject*: Camera (in the form of camera distance and camera angle to the subject) and lighting (in the form of soft/harsh lighting) are so exploited in the composition of the subject that what results cannot but be pleasing or displeasing to the viewer at a level of awareness so low as to be nearly subliminal.<sup>10</sup>
- (c) *Emotionally charged pictures*: It is in the nature of the propaganda film to go all out for emotionally charged pictures – like pictures of the family, of children, of women, of animals, etc – those pictures that possess the natural capacity to 'touch the life space of most viewers and arouse them<sup>10</sup>. The common practice is to ingeniously wrap the appeal/s around such emotionally loaded pictures.
- (d) *A highly denotatively and connotatively loaded soundtrack*: In the final proportioning, the sound track adds up to no more than 10% of the content and message of the film: but in the hands of the filmmaker, even this 10% audio is no less malleable than the 90% visual content. For whatever the specific audio-content (sound effects, music, narration) and whatever its specific function (mood, theme, irony, humour, satire, counterpoint or transition device<sup>10</sup>) it is made heavily denotative and connotative and so structured that it cannot but unobtrusively lead the viewer to that interpretation of the visuals that has been preconceived by the filmmaker.



These techniques flower in *The Triumph of the Will*, unarguably the strongest propaganda film ever made – but, and this is the point I have been leading to, elements of such techniques every so often appear in documentaries, especially those documentaries where the issues are tied around personalities: *Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story* is no exception.

### **The medium is the message – but the impact of the message is in the structure**

The programme of events for the premiere of *Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story* carries the following synopsis of the documentary:

DEFENCE OF A MANDATE is the story of one-man democratic revolution. Dissatisfied with the poor performance of the post-military political office holders, the pro-democracy and human rights caucus realize their mistake in not contesting for political positions themselves rather than being satisfied with just chasing out the military. Thus, as another round of national elections approached in 2007, they prod themselves to venture into the murky waters of politics and to cease the bull by the horn, even at the risk of getting their reputation smeared. Comrade Adams Aliyu Oshiomole, given this towering figure in the labour circle, is asked to represent the activists as a presidential candidate. He humbly declines. However, based on mounting pressures, he decides in line with the dictates of wisdom, that “charity begins at home” by vying for the office of Governor of his home state, Edo State.

He consults widely, traditional rulers and opinion leaders inclusive. His decision receives instant approval and support but his ability to contend with “the political sharks all over the terrain” was doubted. As he takes his message of liberation round the state, the people are unsure of his ability to defend their votes even if he is voted for, as “results of elections are not always based on votes cast at the polling booths”. Oshiomole at every campaign rally assures that he will ensure that the people’s votes count during the elections.

At the election, voting goes well, but true to speculations, the result is subverted and Oshiomole battles on with uncommon grit albeit through the Election Tribunal and the Court of Appeal to have the mandate, given him by the people, restored.



The story-events here can be conveniently sorted into three categories:

- (a) events before the electioneering campaigns;
- (b) the campaigns; and
- (c) the court case.

To the extent that these story-events can be so grouped, the film adopts the categorical format/structure.

And to the extent that the film organizes everything towards arguing a position: that the mandate is people given and that the eventual victory is that of the people – to the extent that the film builds up a persuasive argument, the film adopts the rhetorical format.

There is, however, yet another structure – much more pervasive than the other two. This is the narrative/docu-drama format – and it is signposted by two interconnected features:

- (a) dramatization: the whole of the first section of the film is dramatized; the second section combines acted sequences with (library footage of) actualities; and the third section is made up of actualities.
- (b) story motif: on account of (a) above, the whole film can be seamlessly sandwiched between the traditional opening of a story: "Once upon a time..." and its corresponding closing: "...and they all lived happily forever after."

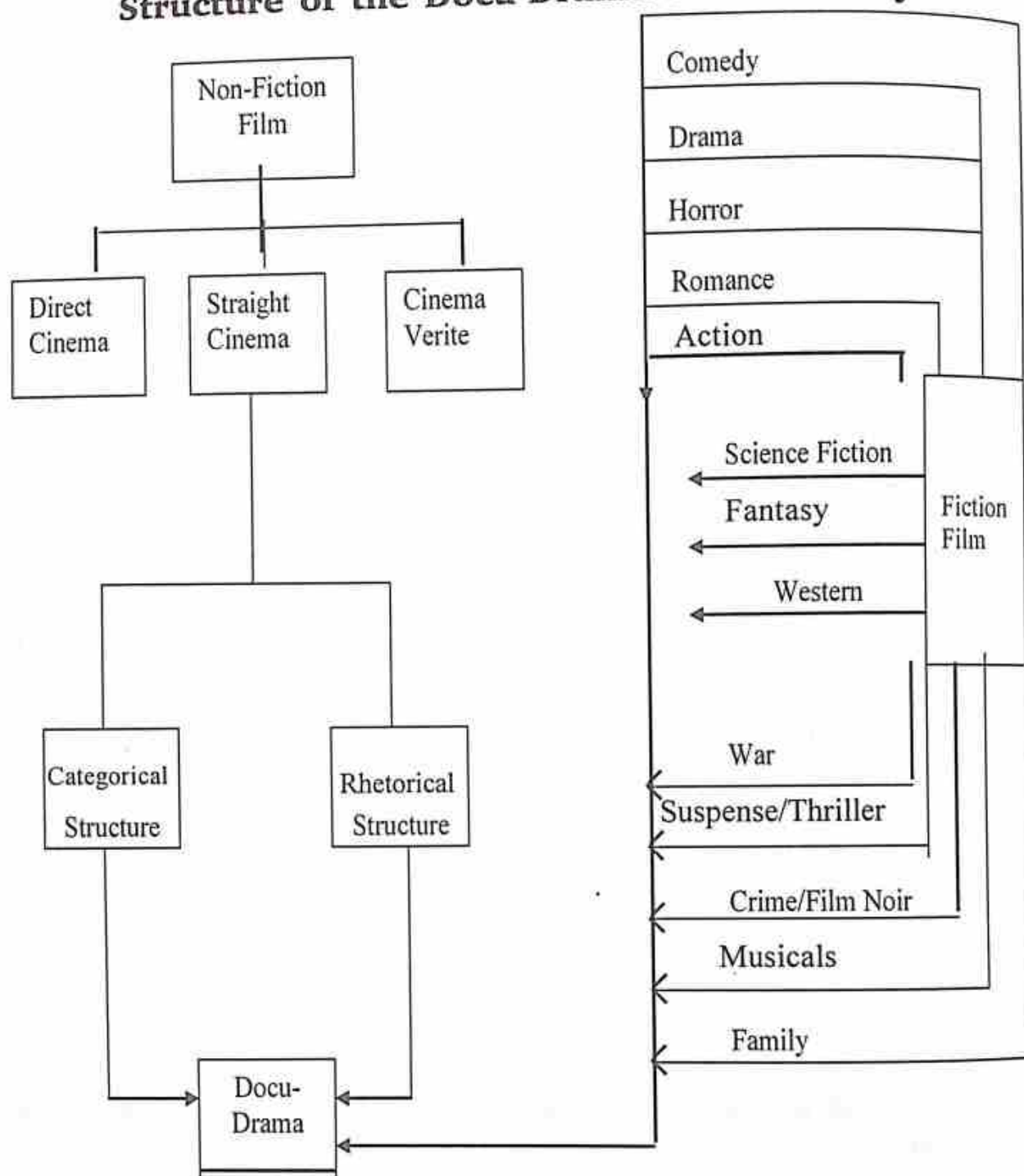
Characteristic of this genre of the documentary is that: "Based on reality, it is not necessarily factual. It may take authentic characters but fictionalize the events of their life; it may present the events accurately but fictionalize the characters; it may take real people and or real events and speculate, as authentically as possible, in order to fill in documentary gaps; it may take general situations and characters from life and create a semi-true composite picture."<sup>7</sup>

There is, therefore, a wide latitude in the documentaries that can be so classified. *Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story*, for instance, has more in common with *Till Death Do Us Part* and *Uncut, Playing with Life* but is totally different from what must rank as Nigeria's classics of the form: Brendan Shehu's *Drug Addiction* and Adamu Halilu's *Mama Leans a Lesson* which have no actualities, no voice-over, etc.

The inherently wide latitude in the form of the docu-drama results from its overtly high degree of pliability – which we must in turn relate to its structure (Fig. 1)



**Fig. 1**  
**Structure of the Docu-Drama Documentary**



Like the bird's nest built out of twigs and feathers from every which place, the docu-drama compounds: all the sub-genres of the feature film with the other structures (categorical and rhetorical) and the other types/genres (direct cinema and cinema verite) of the documentary – creating, thereby, a highly fluid form.

This fluidity becomes more meaningful. I am inclined to believe, in the context of the origins of the theories of the direct cinema –



which Hartmut Bitomsky<sup>11</sup> traces to the following conditions of the war time documentary:

1. Reduction of the technical threshold, in the case of using film.
  - Lightweight portable camera, pilot-driven Nagra for sync sound, 16mm format, and sensitive film material which is supposed to make extra lighting superfluous.
  - The crew consists only of one camera-person and one sound-person. Division of labor and cooperation are reduced to a minimum.
  - Low production-costs. High consumption of material and shooting time.
2. The idea of a mobile camera originates from (or is a result of) the logic of military operations. The camera has to follow, disappear, even submerge itself in the shooting scenes.
  - A synchronized militancy of film-people and filmed people.
  - The filmmaker finds him/herself in the same position as the people he is filming. No questions will be asked; one waits for things to happen.
3. Lowering of the aesthetics threshold. Just as filmmaker is hardly in control of the situation, there is no control over the aesthetic value of the film making itself.
  - Artistic approaches must be left behind. No framing or special composition anymore, no advanced planned editing. The input of the filmmaker is being reduced.
4. The film is no longer structured by the filmmakers, it is going to be structured by the events in which they find themselves placed.
  - The shooting and recording takes place according to the principle of trial and error assuming that life and reality are constructed and functioning in the same way.
5. The film has to go through and experience the direct quality of the events.
  - A person being filmed is not allowed to talk, but has to be busy with something, he or she must do something, and he or she has to take his or her pursuits more seriously than the fact that he or she is being filmed.

- No commentary, no mediation. By leaving this out, it becomes clear that one wants to catch the natural course of the occurrences.
- Everything has to follow the path of a fiction film – a spectacle, but true and real.

The issue here is that *Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story* is a docu-drama documentary – but it is also a compilation documentary: some sixty percent (60%) of it come from archival footage, sourced from TV news bulletin sources. Hence those overt tones of the direct cinema/cinema verite we read into its video and audio deigesis:

#### Video

- Action footage: there are three distinct blocs of this – Oshiomole is convinced to run; the electioneering campaigns and the election; and the court case/verdict.
- Library footage: all the footage to do with the electioneering campaigns and the court case/verdict belong here – these have all been recycled from other films, news bulletins and the like.
- Interviews – among them, two structured interviews of Oshiomole: in both cases, the interviewer is on camera.
- Re-enactments – of past events: the whole of the first section.
- Still photos
- Graphics, titles, etc.

#### Audio

- Voice-over narration: mainly used as a bridge.
- Synchronous sound: evident in all the sequences – but structured in the actualities.
- Sound effects – both spot and atmosphere the one, more evident in the re-enactment; the other, more evident in the actualities.
- Music – as bridge and mood.

#### Conclusion

*Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story* is a docu-drama documentary that combines both the rhetorical and categorical



approaches in its basic form. It is also, no matter how we choose to view it, a propaganda film. Its simplicity is only seemingly, for it effectively masks a very complete form. On that whole, it is a highly successful documentary film.

With the other documentaries of the period (*Uncut, Playing with Life, Nigerian Cinema: Pioneers and Practitioners, Till Death do Us Part, Child Trafficking in Nigeria, Bariga Boys and Innovating for Africa*) I see it (*Defence of a Mandate: The Oshiomole Story*) I see it as an indication of the rise and rise of the documentary film in Nigeria.

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