

CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY IN NIGERIAN HOME VIDEO FILMS: THE QUESTION FOR IDENTITY

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Abstract

One of the most expressive forms of arts is the video film medium. This is because of its potency in using the motion picture to communicate values, ideas, and societal orientation etc. through the combination of the sense of sound and sight. The quality of Nollywood videos is constantly under comparison with foreign movies in terms of technology, acting, story, ideas etc. But the truth which might not be known to many theatre goers/admirers is that the culture and ideology of a society affects the artistic product of that society. Thus, ideology and culture should form one of the yard sticks in measuring and scoring Nollywood movies and not necessarily using foreign movies which are structured according to the culture and tradition of their society in assessing our movies. Culture and ideology could be in terms of aesthetics of story, themes, plot, characterization, set, narrative sequence and general content. If movies are to reflect the society, then culture and ideology should be appreciated more in Nigerian movies despite the much anticipated change. There is something unique about Nigerian culture which is reflected in their video films. Nigerian video films are better appraised and appreciated based on our culture. Therefore, this paper posits that Nollywood films should not lose sight of retaining, safeguarding, and improving Nigerian cultural ideology even while embracing new technological innovations in video film making because films give back to the society what they get from the society. This paper answers the question, do Nigerian video films reflect the true culture and ideology of the people?

Key Words: Culture, Ideology, Home Videos, Identity

Introduction

The influence of video film on the Nigerian populace is being felt beyond the speed imagined of it. This is especially as the industry sprang up out of the independent private producers without the government having full grip of the production and distribution network. Unlike in the colonial days of film making, Nigerian film industry became a privatized business with the coming of the electronic marketers into the business. A video-film as it is called is being embraced by the people as it encourages the film makers to chant out more films on the video in greater number. In most cases, these video films are a representation and sometimes a misrepresentation of the Nigerian society where they are made from. The misrepresentations of Nigerian cultures and values have led to much negative reactions from film viewers and theatre admirers who only see 'witches' 'voodoo' 'juju' and other negative aspects of the film. But the question that should be asked is, is there any trace of these vices showcased by these home videos? The cultural practices showcased in the *widow*- a film by Kingsley Ogoro, is an eloquent example. One may ask, do such practices exist in the Eastern Nigeria? Where a woman will be deprived of her husband's properties and excommunicated after the death of the husband. Yes! We believe that film is the representation of true life but there is no smoke without fire. Despite the bastardization of some issues by some film makers on some thematic pre-occupation re-occurring in Nollywood, the people are drawn closer to these video films because they see their culture, tradition, ideology laid out in these videos. There is easy identification of the unfolding events with the day to day life of the people.

Another perceptive analysis to this is that films are made with the aim of condemning any social vice experienced in the society. The idea of *living in bondage* is not to show the entire world that Nigerians are now experts in money ritual but that it is the film makers' voice and approach of saying that evil ideology is not good and should not be accepted by the society. Therefore, in identity formation through video films, films should be viewed not just from the overt story but also from the covert side to be able to appreciate the film maker's role in forming the societal identity. Suffice it to say that identity formation is dynamic in the sense that it is not stuck to a template but it is formed and reformed as the society progresses.

Culture and Ideology in Nigeria Video Film

Culture is one of the most popular words we hear and yet it appears more complex to define. This is because of its traversing meaning and reoccurrence in different spheres of life. The popular definition that culture is the people's way of life is not out of context but culture is

beyond that. This is because one's way of life can be improved, changed, redirected as change is inevitable. So as the world is dynamic so is every aspect of our culture dynamic. The dynamism or change could originate from imported lifestyle or as a result of technological development of the society. The Advance learners English Dictionary says culture "is the attitudes and behavior" that are characteristic of a particular group or organization. Culture has to do with the way a set of people do things irrespective of the factors that influence them in their actions. Such factors could be geographical, scientific, educational, hereditary etc. Here we look at culture beyond the hereditary aspect of it where we do, say, live our lives based on what we got from our parents. This accounts for the reason why an English speaking man can be cultured to speak French, yet he never originated from France. So being a way of life means that culture is influencable. Abah (2009) says that culture is

"Seen as engaged in context over those boundaries of class, hierarchy and access, even when the boundaries may not be clearly defined, hence the notion of the culture of the aristocracy and the ruling class, and the low of common culture of the people" (p.732).

Abah's statement showcases culture in the line of social stratification. Meaning that there is a culture in the life of the upper class in the society and as well as the low man in the street.

As the colonial masters used film to export their ideology and identity to Africa, so is Nigerian identity being interpreted and miss-interpreted by most home video films. For the consumers who are not close to Nigerian cultural practices, the video film from Nigeria becomes a Nigerian identity hence some poor cultural practices being condemned in this video films are taken to be the identity of Nigeria. Films are made with the 35mm cameras (celluloid) while the ideas of making films with the video cameras are born by Nigerian film makers. The name – video film is used by critics to describe films made on the video medium. It becomes clear that the video thing is now a Nigerian identity and ideology. Zajc (2009), puts it this way,

"With video films, black Africans in Nigeria are creating the images that present a history of their own. They are created by Africans in Nigeria for African audience and have specifically African content i.e. they deal with specific issues in specific ways.'

Zajc recognizes the uniqueness of Nigerian films as made by Nigeria but these films are beyond African audience as the European viewers are beginning to appreciate the uniqueness of the African culture.

Developments and Film Culture

Having discovered that culture is every aspect of our life both our conscious and our sub-conscious; it becomes evident that Nigerian's political and technological developments have given rise to the film culture in Nigeria. The art and craft of film making in Nigeria was not an African thing. This is in comparison to the African folk tales, singing, dancing and festivals. As a country under the indirect rule of the British government, we saw film making as a white man's tool in politicking and griping of her colonies. This helped in great measure to perpetuate colonial ambition thereby degrading her subjects to its view in politics, culture, economics and social system. Okome recognizes that film culture of the colonial masters affected all modes of production. This is shown from the importation of the films to the distribution system. In exact words of Okome "the first set of film that the local populace saw was of white faces, doing outlandish things in their environment. These images were far removed from social realities of the indigenous people" (p. 27). This is a clear indication that Nigerians could not relate with the colonial films and their culture in any way thereby alienating themselves from what the culture of the films were. The people wanted a system they can relate with as well as partake in.

The Question for Identity in Nollywood

The question of identity in Nollywood is shown in all aspects of her production. Here identity has to do with the inherent elements peculiar to movies done in Nigeria. In the words of Tunde Kelani as quoted by Abah (2009),

"The Nigeria economy collapsed when we were shooting on film. And everybody thought it was the end of the world. However, it has turned out to be the reverse. The new technology has empowered us. Now we have fair access to means of production we are different. We are a developing nation. We have lost our cinema infrastructure.

We are trying to reinvent ourselves in the areas of democracy, electricity, portable water; we are struggling to keep up with education. We have to take our time and find our own path and develop at our own rate” (p. 734)

The Nigerian film makers and viewers opted for the mode of production and the story that the people can identify with. The film industry in Nigeria is not regretting the collapse of the British structure in film making because they never in real sense identified with it. Starting from the sponsorship, to the content of the story, it never mirrored them. Looking at the development that Kelani has pointed out, you wonder if Nigerian film industry would have made the improvement it has made today without forcefully deviating from the ideology of the British celluloid film making to the idea of video-film.

Aspects of Culture in Nigeria Video Film

Film is believed to be a slice of life because it feeds on the societal values, ideologies and cultures of the people. These aspects of culture are eloquent in many areas among which are story, plot, locale, sound (dialogue), technology, and marketing network.

Okome recognizes the breaking of the ambiguity in film making in Nigeria when he says that:

Although the heritage of colonialism has minimal influence in terms of the content of indigenous Nigerian films, properly and carefully considered. Colonialism started film making in Nigeria on a faltering path, something that can be noticed in production, exhibition, and ideological options of the film image in colonial Nigeria (p. 28).

Despite the deviation and independence that have sprung up in this industry, these factors mentioned by Okome have come to replay even in louder dimension with the video film medium.

The stories produced from Nollywood cuts from moralistic based to the witchcraft invasion and to love stories. In as much as fiction can never be eliminated from Nigerian video stories, stories like *across the Niger* released by Kinsley Egoro becomes relevant in Nigeria’s political and cultural history. In this video, Egoro tries to use film to represent and condemn the hatred that has existed between the Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria which is as a result of the Nigerian Biafran war of 1967. In the words of Tomaselli as quoted by Ajibade (?),

“African films has come to operate as a dynamic ideological force with cultural economic and psychological dimensions beneficial not only to the west but also the Africa’s postcolonial regimes” (P. 412).

Nollywood stories which are based on some environmental (cultural) factors make wave and receive high patronage among Nigerians and beyond because it has to do with what they know, understand, believe and associate them to it. Many writers believe that the story from Nollywood stems from the market literature, travelling theatre and popular television shows. Okome (1997) asserts that, Nigerian film video stories stem from indigenous folkstoric practices when he says:

“Ethnic films, especially Yoruba folkstoric films, occupy a special rung of Nigeria’s apolitical film culture. Since Ajani Ogun, the first of these films, ethnic Nigerian filmmakers have done nothing to use this genre to question the devious political life which military and civilian administration have imposed on this nation” (p. 73).

Another aspect of our indigenous story is the quick re-enactment of some social saga. The Aba massacre saga is an example. This led to the production of *Isakaba*. The story stems from the resistance of some Aba traders over extortion by some criminals. The saga quickly gave birth to the video film *Isakaba*. Our stories are meant from our immediate activities. But it becomes unfortunate that most viewers outside the country and the immediate place of this action imagine Aba to be a place where human beings are slaughtered lawlessly. This could be likened to the portrayal of terrorist insurgence in Northern Nigeria by the press. The press presents it in a magnifying form that no one would believe that non-Northerners are still leaving and doing their business in the North.

Locale is another testimony of our culture. Man is attracted to his immediate environment. Contrary to the culture of the white man’s films where the people cannot identify with the environment of the film. Ajibade identifies this as one of the factors that dared the Cameroonian

youths to watching Nigerian films even when they don't understand English language. The nearness of the Nigerian locales in the films becomes more realistic to what the African environment looks like. It becomes like casting news about the locals and their activities. Ajibade (2009) says that:

“the success of African doing familiar African things- quite unlike colonial cinema and imported western features in which mainly white faces do unfamiliar things” (p. 409).

The success of Nigerian video film is partly accredited to the use of locales that are realistic to the people.

Sound is an inevitable aspect of video film as it forms the forty percent of the audio visual medium. Sound could be informed by dialogue, music or sound effects from the video film. The greater part of any film is the dialogue. The dialogue in Nigerian films has been known to be 'slow' especially when compared to the European speed in line rendition. But we must not lose the sight that African cultural rhythm in speech is naturally of the low pace. Okome says that at the inception of Nigerian film from the Yoruba travelling theatre, films were too wordy as it was a direct transfer of the stage production from the travelling theatre. Some of the plays were used in touring round the country. Now these same set of actors who are used to their roles in the troupe; exhibited the same rendition of dialogue in the film. On the other part, these Yoruba films were melodramatic in nature which encouraged the use of much songs accompanied with dancing. It is worthy of note that the British cultural impartation equally affected us in the area of acting and dialogue rendition. Nigerians can't see themselves coping with the white man's acting technology after all, they couldn't inherit the technology of film making through celluloid. The chants and songs governed the culture of sound in the early indigenous films. Okome (1997) says that:

“This slow paced technique cannot be divorced from the dialogue pattern which indigenous film has come to adopt. Because dialogue is slow and tends to be longer on screen. To hold the full significance of the word, it is necessary to keep editing at a slower pace”

Okome traces the reason for this slow pace dialogue to the culture of stage productions which the film industry quickly transferred from the stage experiences. The audience of the Nigerian video film does not see anything wrong to this since they are already use to longer and dragging dialogue on stage.

Our ideology and identity as a nation might not be completely portrayed without the Language films. The production of language films portrayed in great extent the elements of our culture. These include films made in Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and other ethnic groups. Despite the fact that a viewer may not understand the various ethnic languages used in these films, one thing is sure- the various cultural elements identify the unity in Nigerian diversity. The argument here is not whether one understands the language or not but is a story told in pictures. We remember that during the silent films, people also appreciated the message of the films.

Technology is an aspect of film culture which is more pronounced than others. This is because film its self is a product of technology of which if there is no technology, there will be no point of fusion between the artistic ingredients and the equipment. The film culture in Nigeria began with the British doing the 'hidden technology' of celluloid without making much effort to impart the technology in Nigerians. Probably, this was to retain their idea of imperialism of which film was an agent used by these colonial masters. The culture of technology cuts across sound, picture and the synchronization of the artistic ensemble. The comparison of the British standard in technology with that of Nigeria video films has yielded some positive results. We started with little or no technological -know -how on the techniques of film making since the video medium was known to few Nigerians who could not practice it much because of the high cost of production. Today, we have not just improved in turning out of productions but in quality of production. There is no doubt that the video culture is synonymous with Africa (Nigeria) but Okome captures the hope in this video culture.

“there is no doubt that we can dictate new movie taste for our population if we pay great deal of attention to our technical execution, such as sound, speech effects and photography. It is natural like other people around the world would

respond positively to seeing their stories being told in movies, and therefore patronize the cinema in large enough numbers to make it worthwhile. But the product must be good and comparable in quality" (P. 38).

The gap in cultural difference in terms of video film technology will soon be closed with the invention of high definition video cameras that compete favourably with the film (celluloid) cameras. Cameras like the red one, and the release of black magic which shoots on wide screen, 24 frames per second, and the good news is that the price is relatively cheap.

Conclusion

Film can serve as an archetype in retaining Nigeria's ideologies and identities. The post independent films can be compared to the films done now in terms of retaining our cultures, ideologies and identity. There is no doubt that technological innovations should change, but the reality of who we are and where we come from should be retained. The quality of Nigeria video film now should not be seen as a culture that has come to stay but a development that is dynamic just as the industry itself is still in a developmental process. Also, despite the fact that film could be fiction, the elements of our culture can't be ignored from the video films produced from Nigeria. Nigerians have come to carve a cliché in their style and issues treated in Nigerian video films. The cultural lapses experienced in presenting Nigeria's ideology can adequately be filled by imparting into younger film makers who will speedily project Nigeria's cultural ideology in a positive way. Our identity is a byproduct of the expressed ideology.

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