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**Nollywood: The Influence of the Nigerian Movie Industry on African Culture**

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**Abstract**

Since its emergence at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Nigerian movie industry “Nollywood” has had a profound influence on African culture. The Nigerian accents, style of dress, and behavioral idiosyncrasies, all of which are distinctly Nigeria, are now being transmitted as images around the globe. The medium of film has come to be directly associated with the culture industry. In Nigeria such a role for the film industry is still evolving. However, certain factors are altering the profile of what could be regarded as the country's culture, while the film industry itself is undergoing a crucial transition. The corpus of songs and oral literature, festivals, rituals, the traditional religion, performing arts, music, dance, and indeed, the entire range of artifacts constituting traditional oral performance of Nigerian culture are represented in Nigerian movies.

## “Nollywood: The Influence of the Nigerian Movie Industry on African Culture”

### Introduction

This work highlights the Nigerian movie industry and demonstrates how it impacts and influences African culture. “We are often reminded that film is a powerful medium of entertainment and the transmission of cultural values” (Orewere, p.206). In this study, Nigerian films will be viewed through a relevant theoretical framework deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts and a comprehensive methodology that focuses on the intervening mediations between community life and representation.

Cultures are the creation of human interaction. Culture is something we learn; we are not born with it. He writes that changes in human society reflect the dynamism of culture. This dynamism is responsible for constant change in patterns associated with given cultures, and the multicultural character of most, if not all, societies substantially widens the range for influence on such cultures (Hall, 2005).

The meeting of cinema and television has created a new reality called videofilm. There are numerous reasons why Nigerian movie production shifted from celluloid to videofilm including political, cultural, and economic reasons. However, a primary reason was concern for safety, as Faris (2002) of *Time International* noted, “With cities plagued by armed robbers, few wanted to risk a nighttime outing just to see a movie” (p.1). Celluloid roll film, also known as motion picture film or raw film stock, consists of long strips of perforated cellulose acetate on which a quick succession of still photographs known as frames can be recorded (Barsam, 2004). As the term videofilm implies, Haynes (2000) says “they are something between television and cinema, and they do not fit comfortably within the North American structures of either” (p.1). In many ways, videofilm itself stands for an example of technology that can be used for cultural explorations and representations mostly for the individuals or groups who cannot afford celluloid. Nigerian videofilms provide videofilmic (I define videofilmic as relating to or resembling motion pictures just like cinematic or filmic) representations of Nigeria.

Nigerian videofilms are deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts that focus on Nigerian community life. Nigerian videofilm stories are told using African idioms, proverbs, costumes, artifacts, cultural display, and the imagery of Africa. The common Nigerian videofilm genres include horror, comedy, urban legend, mythic parable, love and romance, juju, witchcraft, melodrama, and historical epic. Movie production helps to determine the differences and transformations that have occurred in Nigeria. As Roger (1995) states that every society changes over time. Some change rapidly; others seem to stay virtually unchanged for generations. However slowly, change does occur.

Haynes (2000) affirms, “The study of Nigerian video films does not fit easily into the structures of African film criticism in still another way. Studies of African film have tended to be pan-African, for marketing as well as ideological reasons” (p.9). Pearson (2001) notes that Nigeria is one of only three countries, alongside India and the U.S., where domestically produced movies dominate local viewing.

The emergence of the Nigerian videofilm industry “Nollywood” is a cultural phenomenon and Nigerian movies serve as a representation of Nigerian culture. The movie *Living in Bondage* produced by Ken Nwabue in 1992 set the pace for emergence of Nollywood (Haynes, 2005; Mbamara, 2004; Onuzulike, 2007; Servant, 2001).

Nollywood is the name given to the Nigeria film industry and it is the highest grossing movie-making industry behind Hollywood and the Indian film industry, “Bollywood,” respectively (Mbamara, 2005). Though no one could claim exactly how and when the first time the name “Nollywood” was conceptualized or used to describe the Nigerian movie industry, according to Haynes (2005), the name “Nollywood” was invented by a non-Nigerian, first appearing in an article by Matt Steinglass in the *New York Times* in 2002 and continued to be imposed by foreigners to Nigeria. Haynes (2005) states that Nollywood is an example of Nigeria living up to its potential role as the leader of Africa. According to the Nigeria Censor Board, 1,080 videos have been marketed between 1997 and 2000. Most are shot in Pidgin, Ibo, Yoruba, or Hausa - the main languages of Nigeria’s 250 or so ethnic groups-and then subtitled in English. In this regard, some locally made films are known to fit this cultural agenda. While *Amadi* - a 1975 product of Ola Balogun - demonstrated the beauty of the Igbo Language, *Ajani Ogun*, also by Ola Balogun, demonstrated the richness of the Yoruba language and *Sheu Umar* by Adamu Halilu, that of the Hausa language (Owens-Ibie, 2005). Nigerian movies hold a very prominent place in the minds and hearts of most Africans and among the broad variety of Africans or those of African descent that have been exposed to Nigerian videofilms.

#### **Influence on Ghanaians**

Faris (2002) in his article, *Hollywood, Who Really Needs It?* quotes Chico Ejiro, who says that Ghanaians and Nigerians are like cousins in terms of their common experience of being colonized by the British. Nigerian and Ghanaian cinemas are usually grouped together because of their common colonial history and because their industries developed in a somewhat similar manner. Nwachukwu Ukadike (1994) in his work *Black African Cinema*, states:

Ghana and Nigeria are identical twins. In times of prosperity both countries have competed against each other or rallied together for a common cause in the pan-African spirit. In times of adversity both have expelled each other’s nationals, but even in hard times they still celebrate an annual soccer competition. Both have experienced successive military coups and coups d’etat, inept government, and unprecedented looting of government treasuries by officials, whether clothed in civilian garb or military uniforms. (p.127)

In his remarks, Chico Ejiro says that in eight years he has directed 80 “home videos,” and declares that Nigeria also exports its videos, with particular success in Ghana. The names of the actors and actresses, as well as the roles that they play, are well known.

Norimitsu Onishi (2002) of the *New York Times* in his article “Step side, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood,” a popular Nigerian actress, Kate Henshaw-Neattall, says that when she visited Ghana, she was surprised about her popularity outside Nigeria and she said, “I was shocked. People came up to me and said. Aren’t you the Nigerian actress?” (p. 10). This is evidence of the diverse African audience who patronize Nigerian movies. This illustrates the impact and the influence of Nollywood on Africans and its culture.

Not all the response has been favorable, McLaughlin (2005) notes, “Nollywood’s influence is so strong across Africa that there’s been a backlash against Nigerian movies in nearby Ghana, where police have reportedly been raiding shops selling Nollywood

videos, though it's not clear what laws have been breached. In interview with Williams says, "They're struggling not to be colonized by Nigerian movies' (p.1). McLaughlin states that other countries in Africa are hustling to copy Nigeria: "Uganda is trying to jumpstart 'Ugandawood'" (p.1).

### **Influence on Africans in Africa**

Ofe Motiki (2006) of *In Mwegi*, Botswana's only independent daily newspaper says that many people love Nigerian videofilms and find them irresistible mostly because of their familiar story lines. He says that Nigerian movies are a household name all over Botswana. "Although the whole cinematography of the movies is not of the best quality, a lot of people are in love with them" (p.1). He notes that the common incorrect use of adjectives, nouns and verbs are all ignored and laughed at as in most homes people remain glued to their television sets when these movies are showing. Some say that the reason they love them is that they can easily relate to them. Motiki writes:

All the movies that are aired on Mnet Africa can be found in various shops in Francistown [Botswana, a country in Africa] and are so in demand that even the street hawkers at the bus ranks [bus stations] are cashing in. The names of the movies are not only appealing but catchy too, names like, the Corridors of Power, Father and Son, Sharon Stone and many others. (p.1)

Motiki (2006) quotes a Francistown, Botswana resident Kobamelo Mosheno who says that she began watching them last year and has never stopped:

I don't think I will ever stop watching them and I now know the real names of all the actors and actresses. I have quite a collection of Nigerian DVDs at home and when I have enough money to subscribe to DSTV, I always make it a point to watch Channel 102 because of all the channels that DSTV offers that is where action happens. (p.1)

Commenting on Nollywood's influence on African culture on BBC Focus On Africa magazine, Muchinba (2004) notes:

Nollywood films are packed with simple but dramatic storylines "Ah, you want to kill me now!" - the woman yanks her hair wildly, her facial expression alive and contorted dramatically. "No, not me, not today!" Her body shudders and in seconds, she is transformed into a vicious sleek mongrel, emitting blood-curdling growls. (p.12)

She goes on to say that this is a scene from a typical Nigerian movie - and in many sub-Saharan countries, their popularity is growing tremendously, leaving fans burning with a longing for more. Muchinba adds that the stories tend to be rather plain although very dramatic and full with emotions: the women wail and are covetous money lovers; the men are just as emotional and very revengeful:

Throw in a gibbering bone-rattling juju man and Bible-waving preacher and what you have is a brew of conflict, revenge, trials and tribulations - the likes of which are keeping most Zambians, especially in the capital city, Lusaka, glued to TV screens for hours on end. (p.12)

Oliver Mbamara (2000), a native of Nigeria and an Administrative Law Judge with the State of New York, notes that the film industry in Nigeria has grown

tremendously and has established a presence in many African countries. He says that today, the industry is exporting itself strongly to other parts of Africa.

Mbamara writes that a group of Nigeria actors and filmmakers including Fred Amata, Olu Jacobs, Genevieve Nnaji, and Omotola Jolade Ekeinde, visited Sierra Leone and were hosted by the President, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, and the people of the country. It was the country's way of showing appreciation for the role the Nigerian movie industry has played in helping the Sierra Leoneans heal from the scars of the civil war they went through in the past several years. Mbamara further states that recent reports show Sierra Leonean affection for Nigerians and they hold the Nollywood stars in high esteem. Nigerian filmmakers are now extending their activities to Sierra Leone and other African countries in order to help build the film industry in any of these countries. Mbamara states: "Reports have it that the Nigerian film industry is the second highest revenue earner in Nigeria today" (p.3).

During a BBC (2006) interview with Martin Mangenda, a Zambian citizen, he said that the main problem with Nigerian movies is that they show too much witchcraft and black magic, adding that he did not think that all Africans are like that. He stated, "Mind you, these films are watched by children. Their minds get affected. He said he has stopped his family from watching them" (p.1).

#### **Influence on the African Diaspora**

In an article, *Nigerian Film Industry Grows*, Adebambo Adewopo (2005), director general of the Nigerian Copyright Commission, reported that Nigerian movies are showing real promise...away from home. Nigerian movies provide an alternative to Western-made movies. The Nigerian movie industry has generated over \$200 million in international sales between 1992 and 2005.

*Washington Post* staff writer Steven Gray (2003) in his article "Nollywood Films' Popularity Rising Among Emigrants" quotes Joy Oreke-Arungwa, a Nigerian-born consultant now living in Laurel, who has written extensively on the evolution of sub-Saharan African media, "For us parents, it becomes a reference book," she recalled scenes in various Nigerian movies she made a point of showing her own children. Our kids, when they get here, they get lost, too Americanized," she says "These movies show them the other side" (p.1). Gray (2003) resonates with the fast growing emergence of Nollywood in the Diaspora. He attests:

These English-language Nigerian movies are gaining popularity among the nation's fast-growing African immigrant population, offering their very Americanized children a glimpse of African life, particularly the clash of modernity and traditionalism. (p.1)

#### **Interview**

In May 2006, I conducted an interview with Ms. Vida Causey, a Ghanaian native, who resides in the United States, in order to get a perspective on how Nigerian movies influence African culture. Causey, says that Nigerian movies are fun and interesting. She states that Nigerian traditional attire is very influential. "I like the elegance of it and I can relate to Nigerian culture", she declares. "We discuss about the movies all the time", she adds. Furthermore, she claims "the influence of Nigerian movies is too much; even the pastors are becoming afraid. She says her pastor (an African in the United States)

preaches against watching Nigerian movies because that is what everybody is doing now.” She attests:

A pastor advised us instead of watching Nigerian movies; we should buy the Sunday sermon and listen to it or keep them to give as a gift to others. There is competition over there, the pastors want to sell their church CDs and preaching tapes. The pastors know that their items do not sell as fast as they wish; therefore, they condemn anything that is not anybody’s fault. (V. Causey, personal communication, May 27, 2006)

She says further that “100 percent of my friends are dying for the latest Nigerian movies. You call them on the phone that is what they have been watching,” she declares. She adds:

I’m concerned about my husband watching those Nigerian movies because he thinks that everything in the movies is real. Since my husband is from the United States and does not speak my native language, he thinks that watching Nigerian movies will teach him and help him connect with African cultures. (V. Causey, personal communication, May 27, 2006)

Causey says that she does not interact with Nigerian people as much (in the United States), so Nigerian movies give her an insight about Nigerian culture. She adds, “Nigerian movies are just like soap opera. Most of the movies depict lives beyond our reach. Like riches and how to make quick money. They influence our way of thinking and our way of life.”

This shows how citizens from African countries admire and cherish Nigerian creativity. Causey says that Nigerian movies are fun and interesting, and give insight about Nigerian culture. She says that the Nigerian traditional way of dressing is very influential. She acknowledges that she likes the classiness and she can relate to it. She also says that even the pastors are becoming afraid that Nigerian movies’ influence would deprive church congregations of time to perform other activities.

The effect Nigeria has on the rest of African culture through the videofilm medium, which is a unique means of communication and social transformation, cannot be underestimated.

### **Movie Analysis**

Many people believe that Nigeria is just the way it’s depicted in these Nigerian videofilms. Most of the videofilms have a supernatural and religious theme including “juju” and the clash of modern religion with African Traditional Religion. Juju is a cult that is consulted for one reason or another when in need. It is largely psycho-medical buttressed with the power of the supernatural (Kwabena-Essem, 2006). According to Ukadike (2002), “Certain elements and codes resonating from a particular culture may influence film form and film style” (p.22), for example, Mbiti (1999) says “Africans are notoriously religious and each group has its own religious system of life so fully that it is not always easy or possible to isolate it” (p.14). The movies such as *Christian Marriage* (2002) and *Pestilence* (2004) show that the Nigerian movie industry is saturated with religious overtones and undertones. In the movie *Christian Marriage* the theme has religious connotations with Christian songs throughout the movie. Also, the same movie shows commercials and clips of upcoming movies and recently released movies, all of which show some implications of religion and cults.

### **Christian Marriage**

The movie *Christian Marriage* (2002) is based on religious and parental influence in regard to their children's marriages. Uche, Loretta, and Angela are sisters and their parents reject any suitor who is not a Roman Catholic. The mother says that they must never marry a man who is not a Roman Catholic and that if they marry outside their church she will die. Uche and Loretta agree and abide to their parents' view and marry men they do not love because they worship at the same church and to make their mother happy. Their marriages later disintegrate and they are unhappily married. Angela refused to let her parent stop her from marrying a man of her dreams, because of church affiliation. Despite her parent's objection, she went ahead and married a man of her choice. Other denomination's parents, such as Anglican and Grace of God have similar problem by refusing their children's from marring out of love instead church affiliation. Since Christianity came to Africa, this kind of problem has been an issue. At the end of the movie, one of the actresses who plays the mother speaks that the lesson of the movie is parents not to intervene in their children's marriages and relationships based on religion.

### **Pestilence**

*Pestilence* (2004) is said to be based on a true story about a village called Obinuzo, which was drenched by calamity and disasters because the village had gone contrary to the law of their ancestors and gods. The villagers were concerned about the disaster that had befallen them. Consequently, the men of the village met at the village square to discuss what to do about the mishaps. The village sends ten men to the "evil forest" to inquire from the gods what they should do to stop the disaster. Out of ten men who are sent to the evil forest, only three make it back. The other seven died on their way back from attacks of some sort of spirit in the forest.

The content of these movies show that Nigerian movies are embedded with religious themes. This is due to the African cultural heritage, which is rooted in religion. According to Hall (2005), the fact that culture is a symbolic system gives culture both the power to change and the power over change.

### **Symbolic Convergence Theory**

The symbolic convergence theory is used to explore the religious overtones in the Nigerian movie industry. It offers a possible explanation for similarities between movie "myths" and opinion trends. The symbolic convergence theory, often known as fantasy-theme analysis, is a well-developed theory by Ernest Bormann, John Cragan, and Donald Shields dealing with the use of narrative in communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). According to Griffin (1991), "Through symbolic convergence, individuals build a sense of community or a group consciousness" (p. 34). Since it is difficult to make a causal link between the fantasy themes of the movies and the parallel trends in public opinion, the symbolic convergence theory offers a potential explication with at least face validity (Littlejohn & Foss, p.158). This theory suggests that repeated exposure to the myths and themes of the movies on Nigerian cultures should influence an individual's perceptions of Nigerians and African as a whole. Perhaps the better way to evaluate fantasy themes, then, is in their artistry the creativity, novelty, and wisdom with which they are used, combined, and formed into visions.



One can recognize a fantasy theme because it is repeated again and again. In fact, some themes are so frequently discussed and so well known within a particular group or community that the members no longer tell the whole episode, but abbreviate it by presenting just a “trigger” or symbolic cue, for example, the depiction of juju in Nigerian movies. This theory suggests that the repeated exposure to the myths and themes of the Nigerian movies should eventually influence individual perception of Nigerians and the reality of Nigerian culture.

### Conclusion

Outside Africa’s shores, many stores, web sites, magazines, community newspapers, and journals are making a remarkable endeavor to promote African culture in the lands alien to Africans and create awareness to Africans abroad so that while in their sojourn abroad, Africans would not lose touch with their heritage. This work shows that Africans and the Diaspora are embracing Nigerian cultural heritage through watching Nigerian videofilms. The analysis of this work suggests that Nigerian movies are capable of influencing Africans, impacting their lives.

Given the great influence that Nollywood has over African culture, such effect is reinforced by a massive consumption of Nigerian movies by Africans living in Africa and off the shores of Africa. It was proved in this study that many Africans all over the world watch Nigeria movies. For example, according to the interviews I conducted and the interviews gathered by the BBC radio that were used in this study, there is interest in watching Nigerian movies by Nigerians and other Africans both within African and outside the African continent. Many Nigerian videofilms are filled with religious overtones; therefore, many Africans see most Nigerians as juju people and other negative attributions based on what are portrayed in Nigerian movies. These interviews show that the rest of African countries believe that Nigerians are what are depicted in Nigerian movies. As would be expected, these films portray values rooted in their countries of origin. Non-Nigerians (other Africans than Nigerians) think that Nigerian movies are realistic and they assume that Nigerian movies depict what all of Nigeria really is like. Nigerian videofilms as a representation of Nigerian culture have a great influence on an entire population of Africans due to similar cultural practices.

Africans are proud of their artistic culture and heritage; as a result, they are showing appreciation for the significance of their cultural elements by acknowledging and patronizing the Nigerian movie industry and other related interests of Africa. Movies that are made in Africa and about Africa help to bridge continents and the people who live on them, providing critically important points of reference for immigrant people who are struggling to reconcile dual identities as citizens of their countries of origin and the new society in which they are trying to adapt and build new lives.

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