

## **History, Policy and Cultural Beliefs in Nigerian Video-Films: The Yoruba Film as Praxis**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the roles of history, cultural beliefs and policies in the development of Nigeria's film industry. It argues that postcolonial Nigeria took a deliberate path towards the emergence of a film culture/industry, which is detached from the apron string of the West, but focused on promoting indigenous cinematography, cultural values, religious beliefs and ethics. To foreground these realities, this paper appropriates Yoruba film sector of the industry, through the analysis of two video-films: Ekuro and Oru Oganjo, to accentuate the policy thrust and privilege the positive portrayals of culture and traditional beliefs in Nigerian films.*

**Keywords:** Nollywood; Video-Films; History; Policy; Culture; Beliefs.

### **Introduction**

Culture, by its nature and extant realities, is environment-specific. No culture can be isolated from the environment, which produces it because by its nature, "culture pervades everything a human being does or does not do" (Evwierhoma, 2003:36). Over the years, Nigeria has evolved a culture and potpourri of policies, which suit her film industry, popularly known across the globe as Nollywood. It is crucial to state that colonialism is a crucial factor in the evolution of the Nigerian film industry, because film itself came to Nigeria through that historical epoch. Globalisation and the pivotal influence of the western film culture (particularly Hollywood) have also contributed critically to the shaping of the Nigerian film environment, the development of its culture, and the formulation of policy guidelines and framework, on which the Nigerian film industry now rests. Imperatively, in the presence of and despite the influential role of these factors, the Nigerian film industry has equally engendered an indigenous policy environment, on the strength of the reality that culture and performance art are intertwined.

A particular film culture passes through three developmental stages. These stages, according to Ekwuazi (1987), are: the stage of a non-existing indigenous filmmaking (at this stage, the environment is dominated by foreign films; the manuscript stage (where indigenous filmmaking begins to make a staggering entry); the final stage (where a vibrant indigenous film industry emerges as a testament to the collaborative efforts of indigenous filmmakers and the government through legislations). From the foregoing, it is clear that the history of Nigerian film industry can be reduced to three eras. The first era is the colonial/pre-independence period and is marked by the establishment of Colonial Film Unit (CFU), which was an instrument to further consolidate the gains of colonialism. Even so, it cannot be concluded that CFU did not make any appreciable contribution to the emergence of the Nigerian film industry; it did. The second era gathered its strengths from the country's independence from British colonial rule. After independence, the colonial film industry framework was not only dismantled, credible alternatives egressed with the advent of indigenous feature film. The entry of the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Indigenization Decree (1972), marks the third era in the evolution of the film industry.

The pivotal role of the third era in engendering the exponential growth and development of Nigerian films manifests through its commitments, in letters and spirit, to the realisation of an indigenous film industry; the first of its kind in Africa. This particular era stands formidable "not only in reaction to and rejection of alien cultural domination but also to reinstate our own cultural heritage and re-orientate our own people suffering from colonial mentality" (Adesanya, 1997:13). Along with this era came policy framework and legislation which today, constitutes the policy environment of the Nigerian film industry. This policy environment includes: The Cinematograph Act (1963); The Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree No. 4 (1972); The Mass Communication Policy (1987); and The Cultural Policy (1989); all these policies were conceived to detach the Nigerian film industry from the apron spring of colonial film.

One aspect of the Cinematograph Act of 1963 that should be given prominence is the issue of censorship. The Cinematograph Act itself is a generic child of the colonial government's attempt at censorship, through the promulgation of "The Theatre and Public Performances Regulation Ordinance" (1912), which sought to control the emerging colonial Nigeria film industry through censorship. The Act stipulates that the supervising Minister is empowered to establish a Federal Board of Film Censors for the whole country. The board so constituted by the minister must comprise "fit persons and organizations, representing the thoughts and opinions of persons resident in Nigeria." This clause places the make-up of the board at the discretion, whims and caprices of the Minister. The composition of the censor board, which is now better known as the Nigerian Video Films Censor Board, has over the years influenced censorship in the country along different lines, which are representative of class, status, age, religion, creed, gender, profession and the ethnicity of its members.

The advent of the feature length film marks the coming into being of "The Nigerian Enterprises and Promotion Decree No. 4 of 1972". This is also foregrounded on the relaxation by government at that material time, that the documentary film medium, whose production and distribution it controls and for which it does not see the feature film as a threat, does not reflect the realities of the country's emerging film industry. Coupled with some other factors associated with peculiar socio-economic realities, the government decides (after much foot dragging) to step in by compelling the outright indigenisation of the industry or parts of it. However, nothing much was achieved by this decree, beyond the metamorphosis of the American Motion Picture Exporters and Cinema Association (AMPECA) into the Nigerian Film Distribution Company (NFDC).

The Nigerian Film Corporation Decree of 1979, which establishes the Nigerian Film Corporation, Jos, is necessitated by the economic and strategic need to fill a lacuna in the film industry. The government saw the need to promote local content and to also prevent capital flight as most materials were still been sourced abroad at that time. It is commendable that despite the initial problems associated with its birth and take-off, the Nigerian Film Corporation has been able to carry out some of its statutory functions against formidable odds. On their part, both the Mass Communication Policy (1987) and the Cultural Policy (1989) are inter-related as they share similar objectives in making the film/movie industry, not only as a veritable means of communication, but also as an important vehicle for conveying and projecting Nigerian culture. Some of the important objectives of the Mass Communication Policy include: "to serve as a vital instrument for national integration, unity and international image building"; "to protect the country's rich cultural heritage"; "to serve as a vehicle for public enlightenment, education and entertainment", etc. The synergy between the two policies can be found in the guidelines of the Cultural Policy, such as the ones, which supports "the exploitation of our heroic past and cultural heritage in the production of films, designed for both local and external consumption"; "themes emphasising the desirable, rather than the negative aspects of our present social existence, including belief in the capacity of our people to overcome extreme adverse conditions of nature and socio-cultural arrangements," among others.

In the words of Ekwuazi (1987:47), "the material content of the implementation strategy of both the Communication and Cultural Policies is the same", and both policies have contributed in no small way to the socio-cultural realities, which Nigerian films/movies project. While a film like Femi Lasode's *Sango* and the film adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* meet the Cultural Policy's expectation in projecting the country's heroic past and cultural heritage, others like Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* and Tunde Kelani's political satire, *Saworo-Ide*, reflect the socio-economic and political realities of everyday living in Nigeria. Furthermore, it is imperative to posit that, though these policies have helped in the making and regulation of the Nigerian film industry, there are still some teething problems which are deep-seated, militating against the growth of the industry especially since the video-film "revolutionized the film industry in Nigeria" (Tasie, 2013:23). A sore point is the general attitude of Nigerians and the government to the vexed issue of piracy or intellectual theft in the film industry. The piecemeal and haphazard enforcement of the Copyright Act by the Nigerian Copyright Commission (the agency of government saddled with the protection of intellectual properties) is a huge barrier to the development of the industry.

In fact, the relationship between the Nigerian Copyright Commission (NCC) and pirates especially of the Alaba/Onitsha is analogous to a situation, where the game taunts the hunter. The June 12, 2006 debacle (reported in *The Nation on Sunday* newspaper) at the Alaba International Market, when pirates turned on the police (injuring some policemen and burning a police van) and NCC officials sent to rein them in, stands as a sour reminder of the ineffectiveness of some of the film industry's regulatory organs. Even filmmakers themselves are not helping matters. A vital legislation intended to curb the activities of pirates such as Copyright Optical Disc Plants Regulation (2006), which has provisions for Personal Identification Number (PIN Code), Manufacturer Code, Source Code, on every optical disc produced and SID Code (which requires every optical disc manufacturer to use stampers with LBR code), is not being comply with.

However, despite the haphazard implementation of legislations and policies guiding the Nigerian film industry, the policy environment, to a large extent, has been able to shape the film industry. Although the Indigenization Decree did not instantaneously succeed in turning over the control of the marketing and distribution chains to Nigerians, this is no longer the case. In the intervening years, Nigerians have taken over the chains from Indians and Lebanese, who used to control them at inception. In view of these facts, both the government and industry stakeholders must go beyond policy and legislation, to the effective implementation of laws and policies for the Nigeria film industry.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Many studies have been carried out on Nigerian films and/or the industry (see: Ekwuazi, 1987; Okome and Haynes, 1995; Haynes, 1997; Eghagha, 2007; Tasie, 2013; and Edebor, 2015). These studies have attempted a critical evaluation of the Nigerian film/industry from different perspectives. In particular, Ekwuazi (1987), Haynes and Okome (1995), and Adesanya (1997) focus on the historical foundation and policy framework of the film industry; Oyewo (2003) and Adeoti and Lawal (2014) have addressed socio-cultural and linguistic question in Nigerian video-films; while Anyanwu (2003), Azeez (2014), and Edebor (2015) take a look at Nollywood movies from a gender(ed) perspective in relation to how women roles are generally cast to sustain existing culture and narratives. On his part, Tasie (2013) questions the predilection of Nigerian video-films for negative portrayals of indigenous culture and religion; both of which as often cast as primitive and evil. However, this paper departs from the others marginally because it positively portrays Yoruba culture and belief, especially the important role Ifa (Yoruba god of divination) plays in creating a peaceful and just society.

The paper rests on Cultural Criticism and Film Theory because both are central to and adequate for the arguments, which percolate in it. Being a cultural entity, a film industry reflects the practices, rituals and beliefs of a people or social group. Given this scenario, the Nigerian film industry is not an exception. Culture is central to the study of any artistic phenomenon since in contemporary usage, it (culture) "has sometimes designated the highest achievements of a civilization ... in its literature, science, and art" (Habib, 2008:172). The progressive and broad-based outlook of cultural theory/criticism, especially its accommodation of high arts together with socio-cultural practices and beliefs, highly recommends it for this paper. Defining cultural criticism, Habib (2008:173), posits that this critical approach:

... is marked foremost by its broad definition of what counts as "literature": this includes not only the usual highbrow genres of poetry and drama, and the more recent middlebrow of fiction ... but also popular fiction such as thrillers and romances, mass media ... cinema, magazines, and music."

In the same vein, Habib (2008) connects cultural criticism and film theory to each other. The two approaches are not only connected, there also exists a symbiotic relationship between them, especially when it touches on film discourse. Konigsberg (1994) argues that cultural criticism is generally centred on the analysis as well as theorising of film from perspectives ranging from formal and technical, to the broader issues of their ideological, cultural and economic values/contents. This paper's focus on the ideological and cultural values of Yoruba (Nigerian) video-films as they navigate the lines between film (make believe) and reality, falls within the purview of the academic

interests, which cultural and film criticisms encapsulate. Two Yoruba video-films, *Ekuro* (Kernel) and *Oru Oganjo* (Midnight) are purposively analysed to reflect the beliefs and world view of the ethnic nationality. The examination of both video-films validates the position that where cinematic performances are concerned, “culture seeps into the core of script, stage and performance” (Evwierhoma, 2002: ix).

### **The Yoruba World and Films: A Nexus**

The Yoruba film is almost a direct offshoot of the popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre of the pre-independence and independence periods. Even the Yoruba Travelling Theatre itself, metamorphosed from the *Eegun Alare*, *Alarinjo* and *Agbegijo* drama tradition of pre-colonial and colonial Yoruba nation. Since the Yoruba film can trace its roots back to theatre, and theatre in turn can trace its own roots to Yoruba dramatic performances in their preliterate forms, an excursion into the history of drama in Yoruba land is necessary for understanding the Yoruba film. Arguably, the Yoruba are the greatest contributor to the development of the Nigerian film industry. The far-reaching influence of the Yoruba transcends their roles in birthing the industry, to the issues of content, technical aspects, policy and promotion (marketing). Acknowledging this role, (Tasie, 2013:23) submits that accolades for the phenomenal growth of Nollywood “must first go to the Yoruba. The Yoruba ethnic nationality in Nigeria has a history of committed interest in the film industry.”

Scholars like Adedeji (1972) and Ogundeji (2000) have shown in their studies that, Yoruba drama is encased in Yoruba ritual beliefs and performances. To both scholars, ritual is drama and drama is ritual in the Yoruba world. The people worship a pantheon of gods, who they see as the intermediaries between them and Olodumare, the supreme God. The gods are accessed through the priests and priestesses, who act as go-between. It is for this reason that the Ifa priest in Yoruba land occupies an important position; he is the eyes of the people in the worlds of “the dead, living and unborn” (Soyinka, 1976:148). These three inter-related worlds alongside their cultural heritage have come to shape Yoruba films within Nigerian film taxonomy. The influence of Yoruba belief on movies would not surprise discerning minds. Gates (1988: xix-xx), in affirmation, avers that each literary tradition, at least implicitly, contains within it an argument for how it can be read. To read the Yoruba film therefore, the reader needs to understand that its themes, plot, dialogue, dance, songs and costume, all sprout from the universe of the Yoruba cultural matrix and praxis.

Yoruba films often project a world that is idyllic, an epitome of communal unity, peace and tranquility; before external and metaphysical powers such as witches, forces of evil and other diabolical characters disrupt it. Therefore, conflict in the Yoruba film “is a simple Manichean struggle of good against evil, which is identified with chaos” (Haynes, 1995:8). The mixture of the real world with fantasy, myth, magic, rituals, and the inexplicable – or what is better known as magical realism – is another feature of the Yoruba film, and deeply rooted in the cultural matrix of the people. The video-films: *Ekuro* (Kernel) and *Oru Oganjo* (Midnight) serve as credible materials through which Yoruba world and beliefs can be understood.

*Ekuro* is a film produced by Scene One Productions in conjunction with Olasco Films and Records Ltd. Written by Funke Akindele – the producer of the popular series, *Jenifa's Diary*, the film is a story of love rooted in the traditional beliefs of Yoruba people. Although it is set in an urban location far from the village scenes that many associate with the Yoruba films, *Ekuro* still brings into focus the critical interface between the three worlds in Yoruba cosmology. In the film, Adeyemi (Funso Adeolu), the Crown Prince, returns home from a ten-year sojourn in England, as a qualified medical doctor. At a welcome reception organised for him, he meets and falls in love with Aderonke, a dancer and orphan. But as the crown prince and heir to the throne of the town, Adeyemi is expected to marry a virgin by custom and tradition. His desire to marry the woman of his choice meets with brick wall from his mother, Kikelomo (Toyin Adegbola), who contrives and successfully forces Aderonke out of town. However, aside the demands of culture, Kikelomo's antagonism to Aderonke is located in her selfish desire to see her son married to Molade, the wayward daughter of her childhood friend, Omowunmi (Peju Ogunmola).

On the back of thickened and well-orchestrated conspiracy, Adeyemi and Molade are set to be married. But before their marriage, Adeyemi, who does not want to run afoul of cultural dictates on the compulsory virginity of his

bride, asks Molade if she is a virgin. Without hesitation, Molade, answered in the affirmative. The marriage is contracted and the couple starts a new life. However, few years later, things begin to fall apart in the town, with deaths and sicknesses ravaging the people. Ifa (the Yoruba god of divination) is consulted and it is revealed that Adeyemi (Crown Prince) is the responsible. Shockingly, it is discovered that Molade, Adeyemi's wife is not a virgin and an *ewo* (taboo) has been committed with tradition violated. Following precedent and the tradition on such violation, the Oba (King) is dethroned and sent into exile with his family, where he dies.

Some years later, still without a king and with the town still afflicted and troubled, Ifa is consulted again and it is revealed that for peace and tranquility to return to the town, Adeyemi, the exiled Crown Prince should be installed as king. Meanwhile, in exile, Molade reveals her true colour. She abandons her marriage and child because of her husband's change in fortune. An attempt by Kikelomo (the Queen) to call the errant Molade, to order through her mother, falls flat on its face. The altercation, which invariably follows between the two women, reveals a secret pact which they have but which is previously unknown to the viewer. Through flashback, the viewer is taken to the past and a previously unknown matter. It is revealed that when Kikelomo could not conceive at the early stage of her marriage to the then crown prince (but later King; same one who is dethroned and exiled), her childhood friend and confidant, Omowunmi (Molade's mother), takes her to the priestess of the river goddess, Osun, who reveals that while Kikelomo is destined to become rich, she is also destined to be childless. The only panacea is an exchange of destiny in the other world, where Omowunmi will give one of the only two children she is destined to have in life to her friend. Although the exchange is expected to be a harbinger of another child for Kikelomo, the helping friend, Omowunmi, is invariably condemned to have an only child. After much pleadings from Kikelomo, her distraught friend, Omowunmi, agrees to the spiritual exchange but with a caveat that should their children be of different sexes, a marriage to bring the two together must be contracted, so that Omowunmi can share of the wealth destined for Kikelomo.

Of course, the pact is sealed with the marriage of their children, but with the fall from grace of Kikelomo's family following the king's dethronement and exile, the relevance of that pact is vitiated in the eyes of Omowunmi, who does not see the agreement should still be maintained. Hence, she encourages her daughter, Molade, to abandon her marriage to Adeyemi, the exiled Crown Prince. At the end, Adeyemi meets Ronke again, marries her, and becomes the king after his family and their privileges are restored; while Omowunmi and Molade gnash their teeth in regret.

The movie, *Ekuro*, clearly brings the role of the priest/priestess as a link to the supernatural world in Yoruba cosmology to the fore. Among the Yoruba and within their belief system, a priest "is normally elected to pursue the course of order" (Okome, 1995:102). With the chaos in the town, consequence upon the violation of a sacred tradition by Adeyemi, it behooves the Ifa priest to achieve a balance in relationship between the physical and metaphysical worlds of the Yoruba. To Abimbola (1975), Ifa is central to the relationship that exists between the living, unborn and the dead. According to this expert on Ifa, one of the principles necessary for striking a balance in the intricate worlds of the Yoruba is *Iwapele*, the principle of 'good character'. The Ifa priest as an intermediary or the hero, who fights on behalf of his society, should have some measure of good character in order to achieve success.

Thus, Ifa priest's intercession in *Ekuro*, reveals the sacrilegious act committed by Adeyemi and Molade, while the Osun priestess is responsible for helping Kikelomo, to get succour from her problem of being childless. The king, Oba Adepoju's acceptance of his predicament and punishment in good fate is a display of *Iwapele*. Even after the gods decreed in the film that someone must die to atone for the sacrilege, the king's *Iwapele* spurs him into giving himself up as the sacrificial lamb.

Furthermore, the role of the Ifa divination system in re-ordering the disordered Yoruba world as exemplified in *Ekuro*, is well articulated. It is Ifa's job to intercede between the physical world of humans and the metaphysical world of the ancestors, gods and goddesses. This intercessory duty imposed on Ifa by divine arrangement is

performed creditably well in *Ekuro*, thereby achieving reconciliation and also resolving the conflict which emanates from human's disobedience of the gods.

*Oru Oganjo* (Midnight) is quite different in thematic concern from *Ekuro*. Both movies however, share a similarity in their focus on the Yoruba cultural matrix. *Oru Ogonjo* focuses on one man's attempt to force his will on his people through diabolical means. The film's conflict finds anchor in Okome's (1995:101) assertion that "in Yoruba metaphysical films, the social transgression which brings the main character into focus can be communal." In the movie, Oba Ademola (Lere Paimo) becomes the king of Elekuro village after defeating his closest rival, Adeoye (Sikiru Adesina), who is told by an Ifa priest (Peter Fatomilola), that he will either become mad or dead in his bid to mount the throne except he finds a solution to his problem.

After becoming the king, Oba Ademola becomes so powerful that he decrees that no pregnant woman must give birth at midnight in his domain, no matter the circumstance of birth or status of the person. Any child born at midnight will be sacrificed to the gods, he orders. However, what is unknown to the people is the fact that the king's action is premised on a diabolical agreement between him and supernatural powers (witches), to use the lives of babies born at midnight to renew his own life and maintain power.

Thereafter, a confrontation ensues between the king and his subjects, in form of a protest led by the women, because of the wicked royal order to which many women begin fall victim. But the king is now so powerful, buoyed by the ritual killings of babies born at midnight, that he imprisons all the protesting women without fear of repercussions. Not done with his draconian reaction to the protest, the king then orders that the imprisoned women, which include the wives of prominent chiefs, be killed without provocation.

In a twist of fate and poetic justice, Oba Ademola's wife gives birth after many years of barrenness – a result of the gods' resolves not to give the king an heir because of his evil deeds – on the same night as the chief priestess of Osun. On the back of the king's order, the chief priestess' baby is seized. But the cult of priests/priestesses and initiates successfully retrieves the condemned child from the coven, where it is to be killed. The dramatic turn of events begins the process, which eventually leads to the death of the king and the enthronement of a new king, Adeoye; who has been faking madness all along in order to fulfill destiny.

*Oru Ogonjo* is deeply rooted in Yoruba magical realism, which blends the real world with magic and fantasy. According to Eghagha (2007:74), magical realism:

...explores the deepest fears of the average African, which are rooted in his traditional religion and culture. The return of the dead, the presence of spirits ...and the power of witches and wizards are part of the consciousness of the average Nigerian and African.'

Scenes such as the transformation of animals (birds) into humans (witches), the disappearance of humans and sacrificial offerings are magically realised in the film. The pivotal role Ifa plays in Yoruba cosmology also comes into focus in the film. Ifa is portrayed as all-knowing and all-seeing. The *Odu Ifa* (divination tablet) is the ears and eyes of Ifa. It is through the *Odu Ifa* that Adeoye, gets to know the plans of the gods for him and also the way out of the problem he is confronted with.

As a metaphysical film, *Oru Ogonjo* represents a fight between the forces of evil (represented by Oba Ademola) and good (represented by the Chief Priestess of Osun). A return to order in that society is only possible through recourse to the world of the unborn. Therefore, order is achieved in the film, when the seized baby of the Chief Priestess of Osun is rescued from certain ritual murder, invalidating in the process, the diabolical power structure put in place by the king. The rescue of the baby is a symbolic act, which ensures the perpetuation of humanity and the collapse of an evil structure. Events in the film give credence and fillip to Yoruba belief that the three worlds – the dead, living and unborn - must be in harmony for man to live in peace.

## Conclusions

No doubt, Nollywood or better still, the Nigerian film industry expresses the totality of the country's cultural environment and structure. The appropriation of cultural materials in Nigerian video-films is both a product of and reflection on the deliberate film policy put in place by the nation's policy makers immediately after independence from colonial rule. On the strength of a deliberate pro-Nigerian policy, the nation's film industry evolved an indigenous structure, through which the history, values, beliefs and socio-cultural realities of the peoples are showcased and promoted within and outside her shores. Within this particular film milieu, the contributions of Yoruba people, their culture and artistic performances, which dates back to ancient times cannot be overlooked and overemphasized.

Conclusively, in the drive to evolve aesthetically and authentically cinematic productions backed by policy, sheer ingenuity and prodigious energy, Nigerian video-films have done well in achieving global prominence and respectability, despite an Anglo-American and Indian dominance of the film space. Another worthy achievement of Nigerian film industry is how it has internationalized the culture(s) of the country. However, in expressing indigenous thoughts, cultural values and beliefs, the industry needs to do more to steer film productions away from the crude and negative portrayals of these ideas, for which it has become notorious. Nollywood and her practitioners must begin to see their art as a veritable platform to showcase and promote in positive light, the culture and way of life of the people they represent. The slogan of the industry should be Africa for the sake of Africa.

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