

ISSN: 1597-4324

# International Journal OF COMMUNICATION

*An Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies*

View metadata, citation and similar papers at [core.ac.uk](http://core.ac.uk)

provided by Cov

Volume 11, December, 2008

[www.ijcom.com](http://www.ijcom.com)



Published by the Communication Studies Forum (CSF)  
Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

# NOLLYWOOD PORTRAYAL OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: ISSUES IN QUESTION

By

**FARINDE KEHINDE OPEYEMI**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Nollywood has over the years become a world phenomenon, as its movies are being sold in Ghana, Togo, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa as well as Jamaica, USA and the UK to name a few. This paper looks at the portrayal (positive and negative) of the Nigerian society by Nigerian movies and finds out that the movie industry has not fully reflected an appropriate image of Nigeria. The paper concludes that we (Nigerians) owe it to our country to help uplift her image, one that has been battered by our governments and Nigerians themselves. All the same, the movie business has become a template of unity, a mirror of what is not ideal and also a bad teacher of what is right.*

## **OVERVIEW OF NOLLYWOOD**

The Nigerian audiences' first experience in film screening was in 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall (Uchegbu 1992: 48). Even though film was introduced by a European merchant, it took the combined efforts of the colonial administration and the church to sustain the industry (Ekwuazi 1987: 1). The content of such films can be easily discerned. The British colonialists used it for their "civilizing" mission as well as to indicate the blessedness of being colonized. The church, as their involvement in education and the media industry

has shown, used films for spreading the gospel.

Nollywood is the name of Nigeria's movie industry. By definition, it is Nigeria's movie industry by Nigerian production teams for the Nigerian people. Nollywood has over the years become a world phenomenon, as its movies are being sold in Ghana, Togo, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa as well as Jamaica, USA and the UK to name a few. The popularity of Nigerian films now stretches to far beyond the country's borders. Nollywood actors are welcomed as stars virtually throughout the African continent. Uganda dreams

of having its own Uganda wood, and Ghana is threatening to close its market to the cascade of Nigerian movies for fear that its own productions will drown in the rush. Even international festivals in Montreal, Berlin, Rotterdam and Cannes have made room for Nollywood. The first Nollywood production ever to be introduced on the American DVD market, Joshua, by Adim Williams, came in late in December 2005.

Now the name itself had caused a bit of a protest in the earlier days, as a lot of Nigerians felt it was imported and derived from Hollywood and Bollywood (Not really a bad feat as these are the two heavy weights in the movie industry internationally). There was also that little issue of the name being coined by a foreigner, some did not like it, but the good thing is that Nollywood as a name has moved far beyond these earlier hiccups; no-one actually thinks twice about the origin of the name today. It has become accepted that Nollywood applies to the Nigerian Movie Industry. Nollywood today ranks third in the movie industry after Hollywood (USA) and Bollywood (India). It has been able to hold its own despite so many deterrents, which to name a few include, expensive technical tools of the trade, inconsistent supply of electricity and the horrible traffic-jam conditions which can lead to extreme lateness in production times.

Movies on a general scale fascinate

people, as they seek various gratifications from them, ranging from education to entertainment. According to Simpson & Utterson (2004), film refers to a "cinema, as an extension of the aesthetic manifestation practiced by all peoples: music, poetry, agriculture, sculpture and painting". Despite this natural attraction people have towards motion pictures, their level of attraction varies from diverse kinds of movies such as the Nigerian movies industry (Nollywood), the American movie industry (Hollywood), the Chinese movie industry and the Indian movie industry; majorly Hindu (Bollywood). These movie industries are embedded with diverse characteristics that make their industries peculiar from one another thereby creating a division in the viewing of movies, depending on the interest of the audience and how the film satisfies the need of the audience per time, reinforcing the already held belief of the viewer and displaying whatever culture is embedded in it.

### **POSITIVE PORTRAYAL OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

One basic fact about people especially Africans, is the fact that our lives are shaped by our culture, because it's a way of life. This culture has reflected in our movie industry, Nollywood.

An interesting thing about the industry is its resilience in the face of harsh economic indices,

favouritism, nepotism, inadequate and sometimes non-existence infrastructure. The industry has grown and has consistently told the story of the Nigerian state, society and people. Film is popular culture and as expected, it must exhibit, play upon, mirrorize, recreate, or retell the stories of the societies in which it subsists. The Nigerian film industry is no exception, it has been able to portray an image of the Nigerian society or in other terms the image of the Nigerian people and state, which as a matter of fact is the reason why the Nigerian motion picture industry has been a beehive of activities research, investments, visits and so on. Over the years, the industry has promoted certain identities and images about the country which in a way has helped to boost the country's reputation.

The Nigerian motion picture industry is an image-maker for the Nigerian State. For one, Nollywood has been able to showcase the socio-economic profile of the country especially during an era in which the nation was notorious for military coups and political instability. The production of films in the military epoch which explores the lives of Nigerians shows to the world that Nigerians are innovative, creative and balanced, irrespective of the social upheavals in the country which also negated the bad image being generated in the international press about the nation. Second, the Nigerian motion picture industry has helped to change the perception

of the rest of the world about Nigeria and indeed the whole of Africa through the films produced. Many people outside the continent and especially those who have not visited it have come to understand that Nigerians and Africans do not live on trees or work about naked as had been speculated previously, nor are we bloodthirsty and cruel, but are just like other people of the world who could be bad, good, greedy, or nice because people are people, regardless of their nationality and location.

Moreover, in the light of its optimization of digital technology, the industry has positioned Nigeria as a basket of talents (Adenuga, 2008). The capitalization of Nigerian filmmakers on digital technology has turned Nigeria into a bastion and a force to reckon with in global filmmaking, a scenario that has improved the image of the nation by creating an opportunity for Nigerian filmmakers to tell our own stories without fear, favour or prejudice. For so long films were made in Africa but not by Africans. Nigerian motion picture has reversed this situation bringing good acclaim and favourable recognition to Nigeria.

There are a good number of international film events holding around the world and in Nigeria which recognizes Nollywood, its practitioners and the nation. Among these are AMAA (Africa Movie Academy Awards) whose second edition was held in Yenagoa,

Bayelsa, Afro Hollywood Awards, which has been holding since 1996 and it is designed to host in collaboration with the London Film Institute. There is also the Annual Lagos International Film Forum being hosted by ITPAN (Independent Television Producers' Association of Nigeria), The Best of The Best Television (BOBTV), The Zuma Film Festival and so on.

Nigerians are very passionate about development. As the popular television show hostess and producer, Agatha Amata, once noted on an episode of her very successful TV show 'Inside Out', which features a discourse on the Nigerian film industry "I showed off to my friends in London during my last summer visit, we were watching a home video from Nigeria; they were astonished at the elaborateness of the architecture of the film's set: the houses and the cars used; the sheer display of glamour. They said this cannot be real, it must be some studio, I laughed boasting about it and I told them that is how we live in Nigeria." The industry is regarded by many as an indicator of our nation's growth and development; a signage of Nigeria's advancement.

The motion picture in no small regard has spread the nation's good to the world and there is a global fever to be a part of it, notably from the United States, the United Kingdom and France. Fourth, the industry has shown to the world that our nation is undeniably the

giant of Africa. As a BBC World Report once mentioned the Nigerian film industry "has turned the lights on in Africa cinema". Nollywood is what is on air in Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Zambia and many countries in Africa.

Haynes (2007) elucidated in his paper titled "Nollywood: What is in a name?" that Nigerian films are everywhere and that Nollywood films are purchased and watched by Chinese in New York; Jamaicans identify with Nollywood stars on the streets of London; they are what is on air in Tanzania and they are also the major offering of DSTV Africa Magic Channel. Invariably many want to copy the Nigerian example. This is mainly because the industry has helped the nation to grow and it is the trailblazer in third world cinema.

Many Nollywood movies have themes that deal with the moral dilemmas facing modern Africans. Some movies promote the Christian or Islamic faiths, and some movies are overtly evangelical. Others, however, address questions of religious diversity, such as the popular film *Not Without My Daughter*, which is about a Muslim man and a Christian woman who want to marry and came face-to-face with many obstacles. Many of Nollywood's films deal with AIDS, corruption, women's rights, and other topics of concern to ordinary Africans.

## **NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

Over the years, the industry has promoted certain identities and images which critics have frowned at. Among these are the image of a ritualistic society, the image of a violent society, the poor portrayal of the Nigerian women and a display of a highly ostentious and an oligarchic society-imageries and ideas that have to a great extent become a norm, because profiteering has replaced art. As a critic stated in one of the national dailies recently, "Nollywood is a disappointment (story caption), movies should be socio-cultural development tools if well crafted. Not so with our Nollywood movies, which carry boring storylines, portraying low intellectualism and technical unprofessionalism. The same artistes are featured in virtually every movie. Nollywood is an industry with a large size but with a minute relevant content" (Musa: 2006).

A lot of stories are centred on a ritual that has to be performed, such often involving bloodshed and human sacrifice. This is exemplified in ONE CHANCE (2006), ABUJA BIG GIRLS I, II AND III (2005), THE BILLIONAIRES' CLUB I AND II (2005), BLOOD MONEY (2004), DOMITILLA (2001) AND ALASE AYE I AND II (2006). Film stories such as these have flourished since the early days of video film production in Nigeria taking impulse from the

monster-hit "LIVING IN BONDAGE I AND II" (Nnebue: 1991; 1992).

Another feature that portrays the negative image of the Nigerian society is the way women are treated and portrayed in Nigerian films. Scantly scalded ladies with seductive make-up and appeal adorn the posters and jackets of many films. As a matter of fact, such form the popular content of many films. Often the films would feature single girls who do not keep a single relationship but for fancy and greed would keep a school of lovers who provide their every need and whims. These ladies live life to the fullness on the bill of their boyfriends who soon discover their charm or juju, including their affairs with many other men and as a result withdraw their patronage, leaving them with nothing. These ladies are usually prostitutes in the guise of working class ladies or socialites. Usually they are portrayed as cruel, weird and stubborn.

The question is: Is that really an accurate portrayal of our society? Although some of these things do happen, the films are supposed to preach against them and not glamorize them as the way to live. Although movies with these themes or stories explore and expose events that happen in the country on a regular basis, they also exaggerate and at best have turned many persons into cynics who believe that every other person is out to harm them. For the fact that films shape

society and help orientate the people while also entertaining them, they have subtly encouraged people to engage in amoral and vile activities. This perspective finds an anchor in the cultivation theory.

### **CULTIVATION THEORY**

The cultivation theory is based on Gerbner's 'cultivation hypothesis' which holds that "the more people are exposed to the mass media, especially television, (in this case, movies) the more they will come to believe that the real world is like the one they observe." This theory of media effects views the media as moulders of society and argues that the message of the media is deviant from reality on several key points, yet persistent exposure to it leads to its adoption as a consensual view of society (McQuail, 1987: 283). Despite the fact that some researchers have questioned the validity of this theory, citing weakness of the hypothetical relationship, several studies by Gerbner and his colleagues have consistently found empirical support for the cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner et al., 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980).

So have research by Tan and his associates (1986, 1988). Following his study of strategies for elaborating the cultivation hypothesis, Potter (1988:938) concludes that "this study provides evidence that cultivation effects do exist." Writing about the validity of the theory, McQuail (op. cit: 283 & 284) says: The main evidence for the

cultivation theory comes from systematic content analysis of American television, carried out over several years. The second main source of evidence in support of the theory comes from surveys of opinion and attitude which seem to support the view that higher exposure to television goes with the sort of world view found in the message of television. Other theoretical approaches like Bandura's 'Social learning theory' and the 'agenda - setting theory' lend support to the cultivation theory.

In the study of media use and image of nations, Nwuneli (1993:37) clearly discusses how these theories support the expectation that "perception of social reality will correspond closely to the mass media 'realities' because the images of the world portrayed in the media will be internalized and accepted as accurate representations of reality by media audiences." As Okigbo (1995:107) succinctly explains, "Our knowledge of the world comes from various sources, of which the two most important are personal experience and the mass media." According to the 'media-dependency hypothesis', "mass media influence on people's conception of social reality will decrease when people have personal experience with phenomena"

This cultivation role of the mass media has for many years fueled the Third World's vociferous demand for

a new world information and communication order. The fears which generated and sustained this demand appear to have become even more profound in this age of the information super-highway, as negative reporting of the developing world, particularly Africa, waxes stronger and stronger in the international media. Even in situations of direct personal experience with phenomena, people's perception of social reality is structured by the media. Strong belief in the powerful socializing influence of the media is gaining ground universally. This is demonstrated by the widespread condemnation of violent and socially-deviant contents of the mass media and of stereotyped and negative portrayals of vulnerable social groups like women. Because Nigerian films are everywhere, some of the audiences watching Nollywood films all over the world have conceived of Nigeria as a nation and society of people that are very ritualistic; a 'voo-doo-lised' people who at will would use fellow humans, especially close associates and relations, for rituals either for money or power. This line of thinking echoes out in the Uses and gratification theory.

### **USES AND GRATIFICATION THEORY**

The Uses and Gratification theory was first described in an article by Elihu Katz in 1959. He suggested that the question to ask is "What do

people do with the media?" The audience of mass communication is very active in the effect process. People tend to use the media to satisfy their needs and this according to Rubbin (1994) is the core concept of the uses and gratification theory. The audience is conceived as active, that is, an important part of mass media use.

The theory perceives the recipient, (the home video viewers in this case) as actively influencing the effect process, since he selectively chooses, attends to, perceives and retains the media messages on the basis of his needs, beliefs, etc. The focus was thus shifted from media production and transmission functions to the media consumption function. Home video viewers are seen as using what they have been exposed to, to satisfy their own need. In the face of all these postulations and theorizations, what is the role of the National Film and Video Censorship Board?

### **THE NATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO CENSORS BOARD**

The National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) is set up by Act No. 85 of 1993 to regulate films and video industry in Nigeria. It is the regulatory body of the film industry, especially in terms of content. Its vision is to be recognised as a professional film and video classification authority that adopts best practices in the discharge of its functions. It aims to contribute to



the positive transformation of the Nigerian society through censorship while balancing the need to preserve freedom of expression. The Board is empowered by law to classify all films and videos whether imported or produced locally. It is also the duty of the board to register all films and video outlets across the country and to keep a register all films and video outlets across the country.

In a multi-ethnic and religious society like Nigeria, the censorship and classification of films into varying categories not only give adults the opportunity to see a wider range of films dealing with the realities of the adult world, but at the same time restrict children and youth from viewing what could be harmful to them in one way or the other. This is besides ensuring that other kinds of objectionable material capable of inciting civil strife are reduced or eliminated completely.

The classification system serves two different functions. First, it lays down set legally enforceable rules to restrict admission and access to adult films by minors. The board should ensure that a film or video work has educational value apart from promoting the Nigerian culture, unity and interest and that such film or video work does not undermine national security, induce or reinforce the corruption of private or public morality, encourage or glorify the use of violence among others.

## CONCLUSION

The movie industry has not fully reflected an appropriate image of Nigeria. Ogunade (2000) posits that if we put aside the voodooism, occultism, fetishism etc, we will see that home videos tell us what our actual lifestyle is. It indicates that we are a people with pedestrian instincts, and tendencies riding on a primordial train.

Although, it is expected that most educated people should be able to filter fiction from reality, most Americans and non-Nigerians who watch these movies believe that those evil plots mirror our society. Since most of them would never go to Nigeria to find out the true situation, or take the time to ask a Nigerian about these bad images been portrayed, they would live and die with this impression. We Nigerians know that our society is filled with these evils, but do we need to compound and exaggerate these in movies we export to other countries first because of money? Do we need to overdo it as is the case in most of these movies?

We owe it to our country to help uplift its image, one that has been battered by our governments and Nigerians themselves. All the same, the movie business has become a template of unity, a mirror of what is not ideal and also a bad teacher of what is right.

## REFERENCES

- Ekwuazi, H. (1987). *Film in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Moonlight Publishers.
- Folarin, B. (2005). *Theories of mass communication*. Bakinfol Publications, Abeokuta, Nigeria
- Haynes, J. & Okome, O. (1997). *Evolving popular media: Nigerian video films*. Haynes, J. (ed.), *Nigerian video films*. Lagos: Kraft Books Limited.
- Nwuneli, O. (1993). *Media use knowledge of world affairs and Image of Nations among Nigerian youth*. Africa Media Review.
- Okigbo, C. (1995). *National images in the age of the information superhighway: African perspectives*. Africa Media Review
- Simpson, P. & Utterson, A. (2004). *Film theory: Critical concepts* (vol.4). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Uchegbu, B. (1992). *Goal oriented film censorship policy for Nigeria: Lessons from the colonial era*. Nigerian Film Corporation.