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HISTORICAL APPROACH TO WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN NIGERIA FILM MAKING

Femi Yinka ATTEH

Introduction

Film making has been utilised in shaping the realities of Nigerian societies with various productions, recording numerous possibilities of human interaction and socialisation within the socio-cultural need for information, entertainment and education. However, the process of representing women in Nigerian film making suggests a subjugated and sexist point of view, rather than the prolific gender, capable of functioning at domestic, national and international level of any given society. This study adopted the descriptive method and historical methods of research. The descriptive allows us to conceptualise issues in this study, while the historical method allows us to reflect on historical happenings, motivated within the dynamics of western civilisation as social change. Findings showed that the colonial period was elementary to the successful growth of the Nigerian film industry today, with production output ranging into billions of Naira per year. However, the continuous subjugated imaging of Nigerian female genders, has aided such high output in Nigerian film making, relegating them to becoming gratifying objects for men's amusement within the patriarchal society. Nigerian women are making efforts to readdress the issue of African women representation within African society, whereby the educated, successful, and domesticated representation of women, are reconsidered especially on the Nigerian Screen. In this present age, Women in Africa and especially Nigeria have acquired various societal status from the Pre-Colonial period across the growing contemporary western world view, making women contenders in the race towards societal enlightenment. Therefore, film makers should incorporate female societal icons in both private and public service sectors as creative muse, aiding the proper representation of women

in film making. Such historical works becomes documented histories of better and proper representations of Nigerian and African women at domestic, national and international levels of the societies, functioning across the globe.

The interrelationship between human beings within any given society mostly presents the coexistence of men and women, validating the growth pattern which shows the coexistence between the males and females in any socio-cultural setting. Male and female occupy every given society, dealing directly with societies operating cultural gendered positions. The cultural patriarchal system in any African society elevates the males and put the females in an assumed risk of the egoistic nature that the society has put in place. This is because the categorical predisposition of African and Nigerian indigenous cultural practices guide, protect and provide for their immediate family which mostly includes the woman or women with their offspring. The assumed position of men within their society has been tested many times with significant realities like war, politics, farming and so on, without taking cognisance of the female gender.

Societal growth patterns are historical, cultural and traditional canons of film making rich in qualitative and quantitative output of societal realities of femininity against masculinity. Regardless of the subjugated nature of feminine gender within African societies, feminists approach tends to replicate a neoliberal ideology towards the concept of societal growth, concurrently setting man and woman on a path of coexistence, with more conscious attention to the functionalities of the feminine gender in their own journey, towards societal enlightenment. Furthermore, according to Odi (2018, p. 15):

Women empowerment across the universe has been on-going for quite some time now and it will continue to be topical as long as issues concerning the discontent of women continue to exist. The struggle reverberates around the private and public spheres of human endeavours. It manifests in the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural realms of human activities.

The continuous unavoidable construct of human societal structures strategically empowers man's masculinity, in political, religious economic and culturally, to continuously link the religious doctrinal way of the people to their progenitors.

The experiences of women within their immediate societies are motivations for a feminist identity because patriarchy and masculinity relegate the feminine gender to the lowest class of the societal setup. McDougall (2012, p. 2) confirms that "women's experiences and meanings of their feminist identity were not considered or tested." Feminist ideologies do not neglect the potency of men and their masculinity, but wants the society to pay more attention to the feminine to motivate individual and societal growth. Male gender are perceived as superior to femininity with little or no regard towards the feminine gender, who are growing closely identified with the radical realities of masculinity, in their own pursuit of societal enlightenment. Lewu (2011, p. 226) confirms that:

In some cultures, particularly among the Lelna of Zuru in Northern Nigeria, it is forbidden for women in their menstrual cycle to cook for men, drink from the same source with their husbands or use the same bathroom; they are seen as defiled and unclean.

Gender inequality in Nigerian regimented psychologies and ideologies were built as cultural entities, ensuing man's inevitable position as head, against the contender whose subjugation has been reflected as dualities of aesthetics in film makers' representations to the society.

Historical Approach to Film Making in Nigerian Society

Film making in Nigerian society generally developed from the influence of western civilisation, and interacting with underscored knowledge of indigenous religious and cultural practices of the people. The overture of western civilisation became defined by the colonial intrusion which utilised film making as a major means of communicating western ideologies, education, religion, culture and

mode of living to the newly acquired colonies of African. Nigerian societies depended on cultural festivals, ritual practices, and folkloristic approach of entertainment, as one of the major routes to societal livelihood. The colonial masters saw the African continent as an unknown and unexplored world, and film making was one of the ways of documenting this fact. Consequently, Osunkojo (2019, p. 269) reveals that:

The earliest footages of early Nigeria from 1900s or even earlier are from colonial films. The medium of film is an European invention and it was brought into Nigeria by her British Colony who shot several footages round Nigeria. The footages were shot to show the world Nigeria and all the business opportunities she offers. It is believed that these footages are the only available motion pictures that depict early Nigeria. They show historical moments in Nigeria that are not readily available in most television station archives in the country like Self Government for Western Nigeria (1958), Fish Wick Collection: Nigerian Independence celebration 01/10/1960 (1960), Nigeria Greets her Queen (1956), Nigeria Hails Her Prime Minister (1960), Nigeria's New Constitution (1952), Secretary of State in Nigeria (1952), Morrison Collection: 13: Leaving Nigeria and the Journey Home 1953: Scenes in UK (1953) and many more. These colonial films are a rich source of history that can be used to study Nigerian socio-political and film history.

The need to communicate British propagandas and Christianity required making documentaries through the use of the celluloid and other mobile film making equipment like the show vans, used in spreading information and educating the society. Across colonies, there were various forms of transformations experienced as a shift from indigenous cultural practices to western hybridism, with Christianity as the civilised religious way of living against Nigerian indigenous cultural ways.

Gradually, Nigerians began to acquire western knowledge, with the process of film making standing out as a potent tool, motivating the dynamics of social change today. Onuzulike (2009, pp. 177-178) has

“divided Nigerian film history into four periods for better analysis and clarification. They are: (1) The Colonial Period, 1903-1960; (2) The Independence Period, 1960-1972; (3) The Indigenization Decree Period, 1972-1992; and (4) The Nollywood Period, 1992-Present.”

The Colonial Period, 1903-1960

The need to showcase newly found wealth motivated the process of film making during this period. It is generally known that the Berlin conference of 1884-1885 was majorly to regulate European colonisation and trading within Africa. The vast nature of raw materials like gold, timber, iron, diamond, palm oil, coal and so on, was better presented through the use of motion pictures. The productions of motion pictures in Africa were to provide convincing pictorial message to investors and also educate the newly discovered colonies. The need to educate the newly acquired colonies motivated the need to build cinema houses across various settlements in Nigeria. Furthermore, Olubomehin (2012, p. 1) confirms that “cinema business constituted an important aspect of the local economy in Nigeria during the colonial period. The business flourished from 1903 when the first film was shown in Lagos through into the 1970s and 80s”. The cinema houses and show vans across the developing societies showed British documentaries on how Nigerians needed to adjust their mode of living to unexpected and uncontrolled interaction with western civilisation. Documentaries of African and Nigerian royalties visiting England were processes of film making recognised as activities in ancient times reflecting Nigerians on motion picture because such documentaries represented a dynamic process across the colonies in Africa.

The diversion of indigenous cultural and traditional ways of Nigerian societies into a civilised settlement gradually influenced the disconnection of the people from their cultural ways, beginning to prefer cinema gatherings and watching foreign films, rather than being spectators, at folktales or festivals of indigenous cultural practices which are now perceived as fetish. At the end of the colonial period, British authority abandoned numerous films making

equipment as spoils of explorations of Nigeria and other African countries which have gained independence from colonial rule. Show vans, big commercial cinema houses and the creation of broadcasting cooperation, with branches in strategic parts of the growing country, especially in Lagos and Ibadan motivated interest in process of making film making. Miller (2016) cited in Osunkojo (2019, p. 268) affirms that:

A small number of local African trainees were given western-style instruction in film production, preparing them to work on these films. This training first went on in regional institutes set up for this purpose and later, in London as these training centres were shut down, relocated to one central base in London and renamed the British Overseas Film and Television Centre (BOFTC).

Knowledge acquired from documentaries being made and films of various categories were with the motive to educate and also exploit Africa. The creations of management units like the Crown Film Unit, Colonial Film Unit and British Council created better prospect for skills acquisition through the process of film making. It is generally known that in the 1920s, *Palaver*, produced by Geoffrey Barkas is recognised as the first film, casting black actors whose core aesthetics are deeply rooted in the historical background of indigenous religious and ritualistic acting, as cultural and tradition required.

The need to educate and entertain Nigerian societies, was made easier by utilising traveling cinema vans, helping in facilitating an education process for Nigerian native, both at educational and religious level, teaching of the English language, Agriculture, British propagandas and so on. Also, the colonial period saw several films set in Nigeria, either as a documentary or a movie, productions like *Sanders of the river* (1935) produced by Alexander Korda, *The Man from Morocco* (1945) by Warwick Ward, *Nigeria Greets her Queen* (1956) by Ben R. Hart, *Fincho* (1957) directed by Sam Zebba, *Nigeria's New Constitution* (1952) produced by Lionel Snazelle and so on were interesting motivations to the process of film making in Nigeria.

The Independence Period, 1960-1972

The emergent city of Lagos began to develop, with cinemas erected across settlements including ancient Yoruba town like Ebute Metta, one of the indigenous ancient city houses with cultural practices. It is only customary for the indigenous cultural practices of the period to synchronise themselves into the dynamics of social change, becoming very resourceful to the process of film making. Olubomehin (2012, p.3) states that "between 1939 and 1945, the British colonial administration in Nigeria still saw the cinema as a veritable medium of mass communication and mobilisation in addition to entertainment and relaxation." The establishment of big commercial cinema houses and units to manage the input and output of film production ensured censorship. Motion picture entertainment was harmonised by the Alarinjo theatre groups which became a contender, for the cinemas, majorly showing foreign contents. The traveling troupe served as the alternative source to entertainment from the colonial period across independence and into the new world of practitioners like Duro Ladipo, Lere Paimo, Hubert Ogunde, Ola Balogun, Moses Adejumo and so on. Also, the introduction of television in 1959 motivated the dynamics of film making in Nigeria because inquisitive indigenes that were theatre conscious began to understand that their locally made products could be represented to the society through film making.

Loyalty became a new burden for the new government of the day after independence was gained in 1960 because, the mobile show vans and cinemas continued functioning, insisting on broadcasting foreign British and religious propagandas instead of creating new contents from the indigenous cultural background. Osunkojo (2019, p. 270) alludes that "most Nigerian television stations combine foreign shows and movies in their programming. While the foreign stations can only show African films or shows a few times or not at all". The process of making films with the celluloid, coupled with the critical cost of maintaining equipment, like the mobile show vans, were major reasons for the organic shifting from trying to make films with the celluloid, to using a video cassette recorder. However, a film

produced by Hubert Ogunde's *Yoruba Ronu* (1967) was a success. Onuzulike (2009, p. 178) confirms that:

The aftermath of the departure of the colonialists, in which the Nigerian Federal and States Film Unit that replaced them continued in the mold of the colonial government by concentrating on the production of mostly documentary and newsreel. The Federal Film Unit continued to use mobile vans to show films in rural areas. However, due to a continuing shortage of vehicles, a majority of rural Nigerians did not have the opportunity to see films shown by the units. The Colonial Film Unit was not only concerned with producing films for African audiences, but also involved itself in training Africans in the techniques of film production.

After the colonial departure, the Nigerian federal and states film unit maintained colonial intentions through their effort in retaining contents from the imperialist whose motive is to educate their independent colonies because of continuous interactions in the future. The Federal and State Film Unit continued projecting British films shot in Africa and on foreign soils. However, this period experienced motivational efforts from the Alarinjo theatre group which functioned as the alternative to entertaining the society, and creations of locally made contents.

The Indigenisation Decree Period, 1972-1992

Indigenisation decree in Nigeria by General Yakubu Gowon in 1972 was to totally localise the control and functionality of economy-based activities within the federation. The decree motivated indigenes' interest in public administration at Federal and State level of governance and also ignited passionate interest in the process of film making as pathway to newer mode of creativity and entertainment. According to Haynes (2016, p. 177), film making "sprang from the Yoruba Travelling Theatre tradition, which guaranteed their audience". Indeed, the indigenisation decree changed the perspective of theatre practitioner from the stereotype of the total theatre tradition

into adopting the process of film making as the new trend within Nigerian society. For example, it is generally known that Ola Balogun produced films like *Amadi* (1975), *Ajani Ogun* (1976) amidst other Nigerian film productions of this period and were referenced as classics of the 90s in Nigerian Nollywood history today. The Indigenisation decree motivated the cost of film production to grow, becoming unaffordable to struggling Nigerian in the frontiers of a growing society. Okome (1996, p. 71) observes that:

The problems that beset film production as an industry and as an art are numerous and overwhelm even the most tenacious of Nigerian filmmakers at one point or another. So difficult and unresolvable are these problems that the pioneer of Nigerian cinema, Ola Balogun, whose first film, a documentary entitled *One Nigeria*, was made in 1969, and his last major independent feature production. *Money Power* [Owo l'agba], was made in 1982, threw in the towel after many years of active involvement.

From this period into the various forms of government that has ruled overtime, film making has grown tremendously with the cost of producing film arrogantly high, because of a decree which influenced the level of interaction between Nigeria and the outside world. The film *living in bondage*, produced in 1992 is normally regarded as the beginning of Nollywood in Nigeria because it debuts the use video cassettes and video recorders in the process of film making as a new milestone Nigeria, in the dynamics of social change. The transformation of Yoruba traveling theatre troupe from its indigenous cultural practices which were theatrical performance evolves into film making, reflects Africans in their habitats within the lenses of a capturing device.

The Nollywood Period, 1992-Present

The introduction of the video cassette recorder and players into the Nigerian society changed the face of film production till today. *Living in bondage* was lucky to have been the film which sends the revolutionary trend of film making into its dynamics with the use of

the video recorder as the mind-blowing technology of the period against the high cost of film production by earlier film enthusiasts who explored knowledge of film making acquired from their colonial masters. From 1992 till present, film production has become the hub for societal entertainment with films of various genres reflecting traits of indigenous cultural practices within the growing westernised approach of African and Nigerian societal living. Ibrahim (2019, p. 236) states that:

By 2000, video film industry had assumed a monumental presence in the century and drew World attention to it. In 2005, the Nigerian video film industry was formally called "Nollywood" in some quarters was regarded as "third-largest motion picture Industry in the World, producing at least 200 movies every month (Nigeria Surpasses, 2009), with Yoruba movies contributing substantially.

Nollywood has grown over the years with outstanding films that are blockbusters and recognised across the world for its readiness to juxtapose indigenous cultural practices against western civilisation as potent dynamics of social change. No wonder Asigbo and Dandaura (2012, p. 167) confirm that "Nigerians in many African countries where Nigerian films have become a popular means of relaxation and recreation." Nigerian films are globally recognised because of the quality and quantity of products being produced per year. Also, Idachaba (2018 p. 6) agrees that "the home video industry in Nigeria is worth five hundred and twenty-two (522) billion naira per annum, adding that it is responsible for a lot of ancillary entrepreneurs and provided jobs for many". Such production pattern presents cultural entities engulfed in human interrelationship, as exploitable realities film makers can utilise in communicating societal events as entertainment. Nigerian film makers are interested in making Nollywood a global entity, against the contending film industries of the world, by producing films in indigenous languages and exerting major efforts at representing women appropriately.

Nature and Representation of Women in Nigerian Film Making

The indigenous cultural societies of Nigeria have relied on ideologies in cultural feminism as the structural growth process for the people. Societal growth is mostly presented as men's effort to protect and provide for his immediate society and family with the help of the feminine gender, nurturing and catering for the growing generations to come becomes aesthetical in the pseudopodia runnings of any given society. Ojediran (2013, p. 57) confirms that:

Womanist aesthetics does not only offer women the possibility to change the views and readings of the world around them; the researcher recognizes another view that deals with women's assertiveness which gives women the opportunities of changing their own world.

Film making helps to replicate the knowledge of the decadence in the society by mostly representing women at the point of subjugation. The knowledge acquired through accessing growth patterns of human societies and their interactions thereof, are mostly proclivities subjugating the feminine gender and are ably represented in film making. The representation of women in Nigerian film making helps to characterise women in the society into stardoms, as they represent a gender capable of igniting a functional psychology, men can also relate with at domestic, national and international levels of the society.

General perceptions about the female genders across Nigeria are evolving, giving women a stronger head start in their journey towards societal enlightenment. The presence of cultural feminism in Nigeria tends to relegate the female genders to a more domestic lifestyle, having sex and sexuality as dominant themes in most Nollywood films produced in recent times. The constant need to represent women in film making tends to often digress into pleasure selling, through domestic and social concerns marketing themselves in the film productions' sexist representations of the feminine gender. Morrissy (1994, p. 17) explains that "women's plays are seen to focus on the domestic scene. Yet the feminist playwright may examine domestic and social concerns but at the same time is interested in how

far deep underlying political systems can be confronted." The physiological representation of women in Nigerian films engraves a pictorial sexist point of view, being political at gender level, while psychological representation of the female gender reflects contentions, trained to be flexible at the process socialisation and coexistence. Film making utilises femininity as societal realities which the people need to understand and make necessary adjustments towards.

Conclusion

This study has been able to examine the process of film making as a medium of updating the status quo of women, ably represented in Nigerian societies and to the world at large. It is general knowledge that the process of film making is utilised in entertaining and educating the society, with little or no reference to how women are projected back to the society. Historically, African and Nigerian societies have relied on the structural rudiments, inherent in cultural feminism as the base of guiding the growth of their societies. However, film makers have utilised such cultural trends as grey areas within Nigerian indigenous societies, sorted as entertainment through watching films.

The use of the body for functionalities and the unstoppable need of man to sort for enlightenment, have been migrated into a medium mostly representing female gender as sexist to the process of film making. Most of the indigenous cultural and traditional practices in Nigeria segregate women as one of the structures within masculine space, with women overturning such ideologies by making effort at provision, protection, guidance and recognition in such societal space. The unstoppable dynamics of social Change motivates the transformative representation of women, as a constant in Nigerian societal dynamism. This study therefore recommends that females in Nigerian social-economic, religious and political structures of the Nigerian societies who compose themselves morally and mentally as film makers can utilise their iconic representations as new creative

artistic contents around, and automatically become historical documents on rendering women on the sands of time.

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