

RITUAL AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN NIGERIAN IGBO VIDEO FILMS: A CALL FOR POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

Video films are a reflection of the human society. They encompass the language, rituals and beliefs of a given society. Through the treatment of these variables, a statement is made about the people's culture. Against this background, video films that showcase the language and social attitudes of the Igbo people are seen as a reliable means of image-building for them. This study, therefore, examines the ritual content of Wipe your Tears vis-à-vis the treatment of such rituals and the image they create for the Igbo people. It appears there exists an imbalance in the portrayal of Igbo people and their rituals. The characters in the video films in focus engage in rituals only for malevolent purposes, especially for the attainment of individualistic ends, to the detriment of collective goals. This paper argues that such portrait of the Igbo people is not only lopsided but also violates the idea of Presentation of Culture, as enshrined in the Nigerian Cultural Policy. The study, therefore, calls on relevant authorities to enforce the policy of Presentation of Culture to the letter. In addition, it encourages video film makers to exercise caution in the manner in which they deploy rituals in the construction of the people's identity. Even when a particular human folly is being satirized in a video film, there is need for a balance. This would underscore the fact that rituals also serve salutary purposes in Igbo land.

Introduction

Video film, usually the end product of all film production processes, is the goal which drives practitioners of film, be they writers, producers, directors, costumiers, designers or actors, to

work. Since the art of film is based on a web of interlocking elements carried out by different experts as those listed above, it is often described as a melting pot of collaborative professional efforts. These efforts often coalesce into a vision upon which the drama of the video film is based; the meaning of the vision being dependent on the treatment of performance variables which, in turn, vary the visual perception of the audience. Thus, the treatment of one issue – such as ritual – could result in multiplicity of interpretations. In other words, the theme of ritual killing in a video film for instance, is capable of either destroying or consolidating on the image/identity of the people whose traditional practices are now fictionalized. Identity construction being the catchword here, this essay examines the image which the recurrent subject of ritual in Igbo video films has created for the Igbo people.

Most Nigerian Igbo video films deploy rituals that connote various portraits for the Igbo people. These portraits are determined by the direction to which the ritualistic engagements are tilted. Onyerionwu narrows the use of rituals in Nigerian Igbo video films to two major directions: the first is

the injection of the ritual element into films of secular and modern settings and plots to portray the extent of the often malevolent recourse to supernatural powers and divinities in order to accomplish for the characters a desired individual-oriented social status and situation. The other is the presentation of the ritualistic underpinnings of traditional African societies in films of the trado-historical and cultural bents (1).

The former constitutes the crux of this essay. The preponderant portrayal of malevolent rituals as the path to success in Igboland, has become a paradigm of assessing the people. Sadly, this has continued unabated because much of the criticisms of film in Nigeria have been outward. Such criticisms have often focused on the language of communication and other social functions of film, “without really delving into the source culture, which the art negotiates in terms of the people’s values, mores and way of life” (Ogunsuyi 2). The central focus of this paper therefore, is on the prejudicial presuppositions of rituals which underpin the understanding and interpretation of reality in traditional Igbo societies. Our discussion begins with clarifications of the concept of ritual.

Ritual: Towards a Theoretical Framework

Ritual refers to a wide range of traditional rites and religious activities performed to solicit the gods for a particular course. It involves the use of incantations...charms, magic, blood, amongst others (Alawode and Fatonji 3). It is a format, convention, tradition or a unanimously agreed standard. The functionality of ritual is based on a prior consensus arrived at after successful reiterations. In corroboration, Krama views ritual as “...repeated activities that produce desired results” (23). Continuing, he explains that rituals combine two forces which comprise rules and flow; the rules provide a framework of action within which anything that does not properly belong is irrelevant and forbidden. These rules enable the ritualist to enter into a state of mind called flow. (23). Further, he classifies rituals into “sacred and secular” (24). Sacred rituals, according to him, are “based on religious rites and ceremonies which manifest in magic displays, cults, worships,

masquerades and myths... some festivals and rites of passage also fall under sacred rituals;” on the other hand, secular rituals are

rites that have been separated from sacred or propitiations. Some secular rites serve dual purposes. Other forms of secular rites involve daily processes and events such as age-grade dances, meetings, installations and political activities. (24-25).

Quite critical in the foregoing is the clarification that all rituals are not attached to religious activities. The binding thread of all rituals is their result-oriented disposition. Hence, laundry, dressing, cooking etc. are all rituals.

Uzundu states that “a ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities... performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence paternal entities or forces on behalf of the actor’s goals and interests.” (55). She further argues that rituals may be seasonal, hallowing a culturally defined moment of change in the climatic cycle or the inauguration of activities such as planting, harvesting or moving from rainy season to harmattan; or they may be contingent, held in response to an individual or collective crisis. Thus, rituals serve the dual purpose of consecrating certain moments of life, and inaugurating certain seasons of human existence.

Uwah views ritual as a “place where people integrate short-term pragmatic goals and the longer-range mythic values of a culture, where they can replace personal alienation with an affirmation of personal identity” (6). Citing Turner, he observes that

every society's attempt to mobilize itself to solve its broader societal problems leads to an emphasis on authoritarian institutions, creation of status differentiation, justification of the concentration of power inequality, reward of individual ambition, technical knowledge and other forms of structure, which often lead to conflict, alienation and oppression. This holds that ritualism is a panacea to solving life's problems (6).

Continuing, Uwah, citing Turner, avers that part of the purpose of rituals is to impress young people with their duties to the community and remind those assuming positions of chieftaincy to exercise their power in the collective interest of the community. Thus, there are three moments in the ritual process:

leaving the realm of structure, entering into symbolic experience of community which is deeply emotional and pleasurable and the returning to the context of structure with a sense of social values. Relatively, Nigerians' experience (in everyday life) communality in festivals, traditional dancing tunes and steps, religious worships and socio-cultural cooperation in works (Uwah 6).

Therefore, rituals, according to Rothenbuhler, whether in real life situations or in video films serve two purposes: "backward to convention, habit, agreement and established order, and forward to immediate soon-to-be realized social significance of an underlying order" (qtd. in Uwah 6).

Ritual permeates all spheres of life. Against this understanding, this study shall hinge its analysis on the ritual implication of viewing and repeated presentation of particular themes. If the act of viewing a video film is in itself “a process of initiation into the represented ‘reality’ which informs the knowledge economy of viewers and positions them to make meaning of the subject matter represented for them” (Uwah 7), then it follows that the continuous presentation of rituals in Igbo video films would influence the viewer’s impression of the fictionalized group of people. This view is resonated by Folarin, cited in Alawode and Fatonji, thus:

through selective presentation and tendentious emphasis on certain themes, the mass media created the impression among their audiences that such themes were part of the structure or clearly defined cultural norms of society” (4).

The implication is that through constant presentation of rituals in Igbo video films, the identity of the Igbos has been tailored to reflect a people whose successes draw their inspiration from rituals steeped in diabolism.

It is the foregoing that this study emerged to argue for a readjustment of the general impression of the Igbos as those who flourish on the basis of malevolent individual-oriented rituals. The idea is to emphasize the need for a balance in the presentation of culture in video films, as this would translate to a general reorientation that rituals also serve salutary functions in Igboland. To achieve this therefore, this researcher shall do a textual analysis of the ritual content of *Wipe your Tears* vis-à-vis the treatment of such rituals and the image they create for the Igbo people.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws strength from Ekwuazi's postulation, thus:

On the screen, the image is assertive: it is supreme – in every which way. This assertiveness/supremacy of the image must, to a significant extent, be traced to the fact that it is invariably an image in the process of becoming. We are not given an account or report of the image; we are given the image in the act or process of appearing; of being, of communicating – we become witnesses to an incarnation (168).

It is in this frame of mind that we shall analyze the ritual content of *Wipe your Tears*.

Synopsis of *Wipe your Tears*

The video film relays the story of an Igbo community wherein people depend on malevolent ritualistic engagements as the only solution to their problems. In order to achieve her selfish aim and enjoy total control over her daughter and fiancé, Chinwe (Ogechi Onyewuenyi) engages the services of Nkponkiti, a dangerous native doctor that operates in the community. Uju (Ngozi Ezeonu) also receives a charm from Nkponkiti in order to have Charity (Oge Okoye), her daughter in-law, to confess to killing her husband, Sam (Hayez Achu). The inefficacy of this strategy leads her to forcefully impose widowhood practices on Charity. The latter invites the police to arrest Uju but her (Uju's) plea for forgiveness and promise for repentance save her from

incarceration. It is on this note that the video film, *Wipe your Tears*, ends.

Ritual and Identity Construction in *Wipe your Tears*

From time immemorial, man reacts to the happenings in his world through verbal or non-verbal communication. Ritual is a branch of non-verbal communication whose result-oriented nature sets the stage for societal reconstruction. Being an important aspect of African traditional religion, ritual pervades all human endeavours. Video films – a reflection of life – contain ample illustrations of the Igbo man and his ritualistic ventures. Ritual is at the core of thematic preoccupations for most Igbo video films.

However, critics and the regulatory body (National Film and Video Censors Board) have severely criticized Nigerian home videos for placing too much emphasis on what is described as ‘negative themes’, which include occultism, blood, corruption, sex, violence, fetishism, ritualism and other negative practices (Alawode and Fatonji 6).

In spite of these criticisms, recently released video films are overburdened with similar themes. The video film under study – *Wipe your Tears* – which was produced in 2013, constitutes a violation of these criticisms.

The deployment of rituals in the attainment of selfish goals first occurs in the conversation between Uju and Chinwe:

Uju: Nne, lee anya, it is not only taking the horse to the stream. You can actually force the horse to drink water.

Chinwe: That is exactly why I’m here.

Uju: There is no other option than to go to Mkponkiti.

Chinwe: Jesu Maria!

Uju: O gini?

Chinwe: Mkponkiti, the native doctor?

Uju: Yes

Chinwe: Are you suggesting I should kill my daughter?

Uju: God forbid! I am a mother... (Mkponkiti) is the only who has the solution to your problem... He will give you special powers so that anything you say is authority. Your daughter will never question your authority.

The dialogue above clearly demonstrates the false identity video film makers construct for the Igbos in particular and Nigerians in general. In comparing Nollywood video films to Cameroon's, Ashuntantang corroborates the negative portrait video film makers assign to Nigerians as follows: ... "(the first set of Cameroonian films have) all the marks of the popular theme of the occult in Nigerian films including graphic images of occult members eating human flesh" (141). It must be noted that this analogy testifies to the preponderance of malevolent rituals in Nigerian video films. These rituals which include witchcraft, 'blood money' etc. are often inspired by sheer individualistic villainy to the detriment of the collective interest of the others.

Furthering the ongoing line of thought therefore, Elvis implicitly laments that, unlike the Cameroonian video films, the Nollywood engages in incessant portrayal of negative rituals: "...witchcraft is also practiced in Cameroon but it is not as graphic

as the Nigerians show in their movies... (qtd. in Ashuntantang 141). This resonates the awful image being given to Nigerians as a result of the over-bloated emphasis placed on atrocious rituals in movies. Little wonder that Elvis abhors co-starring of Nigerian actors. According to him, "...even if I could afford a Nigerian actor, I will not use one because I don't want them to influence my story" (qtd. in Ashuntantang 141). Indeed, Elvis' attitude only supports the view that film is a psycho-social medium, boundless in philosophy and utilitarian applications.

The presentation of a people in video films has grave consequences in the non-fictitious realm. *Wipe your Tears* follows a covert operation undertaken by a team of skilled evildoers who masquerade as devout Catholics. This plays up in the video film during a psychological crisis encountered by Chinwe. She becomes caught in the conflict between the human conscience and the drive for selfish desires. She thus asks Uju: "Are you sure he (Mkponkiti) can do it? He can handle it?" Uju affirms. She further battles with her conscience over her Catholic costumes (such as chaplets and scapular) while visiting a native doctor – Mkponkiti. Again, Uju resolves her (Chinwe's) intra-personal conflict by advising her to take off such accessories before going. Convinced, evil rituals triumph over Chinwe's good conscience.

Adichie decries the predominance of evil rituals in Nigerian video films. She speaks through one of the characters, Mariama, thus: "I watch (Nigerian films) but no, I don't go to Nigeria!...many of them do bad things. Even killing for money" (187). This opinion emanates from Mariama's consumption of many Nigerian video films. Video films like *Wipe your Tears* fuel this perception of Igbos and even Nigerians.

To maximize her authority over her daughter therefore, Chinwe puts to use the items she receives from Mkponkiti – a

wooden box which contains a wrap of powdery substance and a skull, tied with a red piece of cloth. She pinches the substance and pours on the skull three times and speaks: "Anything I say, they must do it". Her daughter eventually yields to her will. Unfortunately, her only drive for this ritual is to have her daughter shop for her wedding materials in London, and boost her ego as a result. She achieves this aim. The efficacy of the ritual thrills her to demand for some gift items from London. The triviality of this wish undoubtedly portrays the Igbos as a people who hurry to rituals to manipulate others to submission. This is also replicated in the case of Uju.

Upon the death of her son, Sam (Hayez Achu), Uju heads straight to Mkpokiti. He informs her that her daughter-in-law, Charity (Oge Okoye) is responsible for her husband's death. Uju screams thus: "I knew it! I just wanted you to confirm it". Mkpokiti then promises to make Charity confess. He gives Uju a piece of kola nut and instructs her: "Take, keep it at the entrance of her house and you will see what will happen". As she complies, the kola nut turns into a lizard and disappears into Charity's room. They conclude that Charity is a witch. But not for her eventual invitation of the police, Uju would not have apologized to her. In any case, Chinwe and Uju are neither reprimanded nor suffer any form of repercussion for their conducts in the video film. When this drama resolution is reconciled with the fact that, onscreen, "we actually see the image coming into being/appearing and thereby communicating, we believe the image simply could not be false" (Ekwuazi 169), then it becomes obvious that the film maker has (un)consciously misinformed the world that the Igbos condone, practice and flourish in diabolical rituals.

Recommendations

Video films that portray Igbos in a negative light must be discouraged. Nwabueze laments that, “rather than launder Nigeria’s foreign image, what the Nigerian video film has succeeded in doing is to blacken other people’s concept of us” (qtd. in Onyerionwu 107). In corroboration, Ekwuazi decries the situation as follows:

As spiritedly as the Nigerian image project is celebrating those individuals and institutions and agencies that are proudly Nigerian, the Nigerian home video is doing the greatest damage to Nigeria and her ethnic nationalities... for the home video has continued to produce those negative stereotype images which find a resonance in the westerners consciousness. What then happens is this: on the one hand, with its superior technology, the West repackages and propagates those images; on other hand, the Western correspondents reporting Africa, filters his dispatches through the layers of those same stereotypes and negative images... (Ekwuazi 173).

Indeed, Nollywood’s penchant for glamourizing wicked rituals in Igbo video films paints all Igbos as witches and wizards and aggressive millionaires who must kill to be rich. Therefore, such video films as *Wipe your Tears*, *Living in Bondage 1 & 2*, *Billionaires Club 1 & 2* among others, should not be classified as authentic Igbo video films because they are replete with wicked rituals that do not only denigrate but also undermine the true nature of the Igbos.

To forestall further debilitation of the image of the Igbos in the international community, this paper recommends a state action. State action, in this context, means those activities and/or actions which are developed, packaged and designed by government to achieve a special purpose. *The Cultural Policy of Nigeria* is a legal document that prescribes the methods, procedures, guidelines and practice of culture in Nigeria. It also addresses the issue of presentation of culture through any medium. Presentation of Culture in the policy refers to:

The means by which culture is disseminated in its bid to facilitate the accessibility of arts and culture to the widest spectrum of Nigeria e.g. through theatre, films, exhibitions, seminars, workshop and publications, or the mass media (7).

Apparently, the video film in focus violates the prescriptions of *The Cultural Policy of Nigeria*. It is for this reason that this study recommends that the Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) should intensify efforts in censoring the quality of films that are released into the market for public consumption. Emphasis must be placed on Presentation of Culture in relation to the image being built for the people.

Finally, it is the opinion of this researcher that the Nigerian video film must begin to have a professional touch. To this end, the services of professional script writers must be sought to ensure that video film productions are being built on good storylines. The absence of writers who are knowledgeable in the art of script writing is largely responsible for poverty of morals and messages in Nollywood video films. If we have professional script writers

and implement the policies enshrined in *The Cultural Policy*, the issue of false identity construction would become history.

Conclusion

This study has reasonably established that images in video films are reflections of reality. Thus, video film makers must exercise caution in the deployment of rituals to construct an identity for a people. In addition, the study recommends the need for professional script writers as well as the implementation of the policy of Presentation of Culture, as enshrined in *The Nigerian Cultural Policy*.

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