

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF BELLIGERENT ATROCITIES IN NIGERIA AND NOLLYWOOD VIDEO-FILMS

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Abstract:

*This article examines parallelisms between Nollywood representations and Nigeria's socio-cultural landscapes in the area of violence. By means of nuanced textual analysis of films like *Somewhere in Africa* (2012), *Act of Faith* (2008) *Onyebuchim* (2010) *Crude War* (2011) and *King of Crude* (2011) it explores how symbols of belligerent atrocities are used to underpin Nigeria's crisis-ridden situations while unveiling the iconography and vocabularies of satire used in interrogating the country's existential circumstances. The article at the end calls for a rethink on the confounding challenges of the nation while conceptualizing ways of overcoming the quagmires.*

Key words: iconography, violence, atrocities, Nollywood, video-films and Nigeria.

Introduction

The disillusionments of the 21st century have not only orchestrated phenomenal reactions like the 'Arab Spring' and 'Occupy movements' to challenge perceived injustices around the globe, but have also triggered new facsimiles in screen representations that showcase public and private outcries against socio-cultural discontents in people's everydayness. Especially in Africa, where media representations no longer focus solely on the semiosis of

violent atrocities in their dystopian forms but also integrate the spectacle of people's everyday circumstances into texts, the case is made that everything about filmic storytelling these days has to do with some parallelisms between texts and the society. In Nigeria, in particular, the Nollywood film industry does not only interrogate the actions and inactions of the society in its texts but also help to expose at several instances the bizarre iconographies of violent crimes in the country's socio-cultural and economic landscapes.

The polyphonic nature of these representations constructed through visuals and coded languages significantly borders around the dynamics of atrocities in the country to include such ugly realities as: structural violence(s) (excruciating level of abject poverty, social exclusion of some individuals from communal participations as in the case of victims of the *osu* caste system, child abuse cases, deprivation of education rights, etc); political violence(s) (exemplified by post-election crises, ethnic riots, etc); social violence(s) (seen in the lack of social welfare schemes, inadequate provision of social amenities like good road networks, good hospitals, job employment and security, lack of constant electric power supply, etc); gender based violence(s) (as in cases of women marginalisation, patriarchy, female genital mutilation, domestic abuse, etc); digital violence(s) (as seen in online crimes, internet scams, identity frauds, face-book killings, etc); cultural violence(s) (like in the contexts of negative traditional rituals, leviratic widowhood rituals, cultic money making rituals, etc); oil related violence(s) (constituting in bunkering, fuel subsidy removal and its hardship on the citizenry, oil workers' strikes and fuel hikes, environmental degradation, etc) and those of rape, looting and stealing, corruption, kidnapping, students' cultic activities, suicide

missions and youths' restiveness and militancy to mention but a few.

Whereas most of these societal ailments get represented in Nollywood films for audiences' pleasure, they are nevertheless apt commentaries on the zeitgeist of the Nigerian society where even when a typical day begins with parents leaving homes for their work places and children waving bye-bye to loved ones in order to attend school, there is no guarantee that all that begins well will end well (Uwah, 2012, p. 79). Like the scenario described by Thomas Hobbes (pp. 86 - 90) in his notion of the 'state of nature', violent acts in Nigeria, both in reality and in filmic representations have come to feel like experiencing the danger and fear of the unknown, brutal anarchy, intimidation, reckless insecurity and apparent war of all against all. The notion of freedom in the country is becoming illusory by the day as the grasp of citizenship is turning deceptive before all just because of the turn of events.

Apparently looking at the contents of most Nigerian newspapers and the coverage of radio and television channels, the argument could be made that a high percentage of news broadcasts in the country often relate to issues of violent crimes. If it is not for instance on the suicide bombings of some disillusioned perpetrators of anarchy in the North, then it is on the kidnapping of some seemingly helpless people of the society or the clandestine assassinations of some unsuspecting politicians in the South, not to talk of the economic and educational deprivations that have caused most Nigerian children to end up in motor parks and church premises as beggars and street hawkers. Thus, ruminating on this assumption by means of nuanced textual analysis is the thrust of this article to showcase how violent atrocities have constituted Nigeria into a theatre of improbable chaos not only in real time

scenarios but also as captured in filmic representations. This is pursued here on the firm belief that films as veritable aspects of any country's cultural industry do not only export meanings of realities across national and trans-national borders but also help to interrogate the society that encodes them. Let us at this stage delineate the working notion of violence in this work before using key scenes of visual iconographies to illustrate its representations and forms in Nigeria.

Underscoring Violent Atrocities in Nigeria

The phenomenon of violence has seen so many definitions and theories across ages ruminating on its explanations and classical comprehensions. From the Marxian crisis theory of worker alienation to Ted Robert Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation, the preoccupation of most philosophers and scholars has been to unravel the root paradigm of violent crimes in human society. Researchers have ever wondered at crisis and the reason for the hysteria it generates to explore its intrinsic constituents. Oyeshola defines it as 'an end-point on a continuum of aggressive behaviour' (2005, p.61) which entails the use of extraordinary force with the sole aim of causing anguish and pain to victims in fighting for something. Here, the impression is made that by being aggressive, this kind of attitude has the proclivity of unbridled bestiality in attacking unsuspecting citizens in a way that connotes abuses, trauma and damage to the human spirit.

In his *Why Men Rebel*, Ted Robert Gurr considers the reason why violence occurs to be as a result of 'the gaps between what people have and what they expect to get' which is denied them (Brush, 1996, p.524). Similar to Marxian crisis theory, Ted Gurr's analysis relies on the psychological factors of frustrations

shrouding people's angst. For instance, while Ted Robert argues that the 'potential for collective violence depends on the discontent of members of the society [...] as a result of a perceived gap between what they have and what they think they should have' (Brush, 1996, p. 527); Marx and Engels believe that the root cause of crisis in the society is the alienation, 'exploitation and oppression of man by man' (Sazonov, 1984, p.7). By this they mean that the chasm between the rich and the poor in production relationships is what causes upheavals and violence in the society whereby, the working class seeing the prosperity of the rich at the expense of their labour do revolt against such situations which turns into violence or crisis.

But whether one looks at Ted Gurr's theory of deprivation or Marxist theory of alienation or even that of Nkrumah's class struggle (1970, p.17) in Africa, the dynamics of present day violent crimes in Africa appears too difficult to be in-boxed within the confines of these explanations. Like Ted Gurr's theory that was abandoned shortly after it was propounded, so also do these theories no longer withstand the test of time. For instance, if a people are seen not to engage in violent reaction in a situation that is breeding bestiality in another context, there is no doubt that the above listed theories are problematised as to why they would offer explanations in one culture and fall short of verifiability in another. Thus, explicating the concept of violence over the years has not only been ideological at times, but also substantially ambivalent. This is why violent crimes under different contexts have been perpetrated and seemingly valorised as 'freedom-fighting' and at some other levels, condemned as savageries.

Violence generally speaking is another term for aggression, brutality and carnage. Its characteristic consequences are

dehumanization, disenfranchisement, murder and killing, hysteria and frustrations, etc. Whether theories succeed in decoding what it means or not; what is sure is that it truly occurs and human beings and properties are its primary victims. Particularly, in Africa as a continent and Nigeria, in particular, as a country, the reality of violence is on a high voltage where there are constant re-runs of its occurrences as headlines in the nation's media. A few exemplary cases could be seen in the contexts of such media reports as outlined below:

- Deadly election-related and communal violence in northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential voting left more than 800 people dead. (Seyllou, 2011).
- In Bauchi State, rioters targeted members of the National Corps Service, who served as ad-hoc election staff [...] the youth corps members, [...] ran to the local police station to seek refuge, but the rioters stormed the police station. The mob killed the police officer on duty and burned down the police station [...] they raped two of the female youth corps members then hacked them to death with machetes, along with five male youth corps members (Seyllou, 2011).
- In an incident widely condemned by the human rights community, some 2,000 persons were slaughtered in Odi, Bayelsa State after federal troops were dispatched in response to clashes between local militants and the police (Watts, 2000, p. 5090).

- The unease in the North over rising insecurity masterminded by the radical Islamic sect, *Boko Haram*, took yet another horrendous dimension last Monday when suicide bombers stormed a popular inter-state motor park, along New Road, Sabon Gari, killing scores of people. Among those killed in the multiple blasts were passengers, drivers, hawkers and even visitors to the ever-busy luxury bus terminal. A lot of corpses were seen littered at the scene and many others were critically wounded (*The Sun* Newspaper, March 26, 2013).

Thus, the idea of outlining these exemplars is to showcase the propensity with which violence happens in Nigeria as well as signal its nature and dynamics. They are not only committed by private individuals but also by corporate ethnic groups and government bodies implying that in all ramifications Nigeria, like the whole of Africa, is no stranger to danger. In other words, what cannot be denied is the fact that violence is rife in the country and does manifest itself in various forms and shapes: from physical to ecological violence(s) and from communal to gun violence(s). What remains to be said is that while these are reported in newspapers and radio programmes, the Nollywood film industry also represents them as a way of contributing opinions on the day-to-day living conditions of the society. This is the reason for opting to explore its representations by means of textual analysis here to underscore the parallelisms between films and the everydayness of the Nigerian society.

Contextual Parallelisms between Nollywood's Representations and Nigerian Society

The understanding behind looking at core significant elements in films that harp on societal situations is what is implied by parrallelism here. This is so considered not only because these films follow the trajectory of storyline techniques to encode messages but also because films in the main are commentaries on the society. By being couched to inform, they portray themes that reveal existential circumstances and evoke actions and reactions from audiences as responses to what is (re)presented or narrated. In other words, they also interrogate the society by representing its social conditions and abnormal variations. Thus, the philosophy of parallelism is appropriated here to explore the relationship between films and society in the contexts of what goes on in them, especially in terms of violence and how they are structured and constructed.

Looking primarily at both films and society as powerful conduits of epistemic values that reveal the ordinary human situational circumstances of individuals and how they carry out their everydayness through the paradoxes of life, the view here is to argue that films are the mirror of the society and those who encode them draw from ideological impressions made of the society in given circumstances. Especially in relation to Nollywood and how it represents what is happening in Nigeria, instances abound where filmic storylines have resemblances with lived-in conditions of the society. Grasped from this perspective, they serve the basic purpose of the media as enunciated by Lull in relation to television viewing as that of helping viewers 'make sense of their environments' (2000, p.173).

Specifically the Nigerian film producers and auteurs attract home audiences to their productions by playing out symbols that resonate with their lifestyles such as the visual aesthetics of disasters and violences. Hence, by means of key scenes in some select films this article gears towards exploring some instances of belligerent atrocities in Nollywood and in Nigeria while unveiling the iconography of satire used in interrogating her existential circumstances.

Theorising Violence in Nigerian Films

Even though every society has a fair share of uprisings and violent discontents as seen in the nature of organised crimes like kidnapping or the recent gun-shootings of pupils and tertiary students alike in some American schools, it is still appropriate to highlight that the nature of violence(s) in Nigeria like elsewhere in Africa is not only degenerative but also devastating. The aggression that characterises it, for instance, those of digital, criminal, oil and ritual types is without doubt not always connected with the political misdemeanours of those campaigning for equity and the recognition of their economic rights under structural alienations as argued by Ted Gurr and Karl Marx. Rather than that what one sees is the unspoken violence of street hawking children being raped at will by the lawless 'others' who are not brought to book by the government. The same is the scenario of violence orchestrated by the police who drive against traffic in service to some expatriates and end up causing damage to others who mistakenly collide with them and are also not charged to court.

The film, *Somewhere in Africa* (Arase, 2012) using key characters like rebels, soldiers, politicians and students represents issues of violence in a way that rehearses African and Nigeria's

political scenarios. Starring key artistes including Majid Michel (General Mombasa), David Diotah (President Gabiza), Eve Asare (Wendy), Martha Ankomah (Nivera) and a host of others, this film, harps on the issue of violence across the African continent. Beginning with an initial opening music score that accompanies opening credits and establishment shots, some intriguing texts are cast on the screen depicting the mission of the movie. Among other things, the opening graphics unveils a lamentation as follows: 'the last two decades however were unarguably the most turbulent of times for most African nations. Blood like a pond filled our streets... terror like the rising sun filled, greeted our eyes... somewhere and everywhere in Africa, a dirge has been sung.'

The singing of dirges across Africa is due mainly to the number of violences experienced regularly. In this film, the fact of political coup d'état is one reason for such lamentations. Like most scenarios in Africa where lack of welfare of the citizenry is the characteristic badge of leadership styles, coups and counter-coups are the order of the day since most military leaders often think that the best way of correcting anomalies is by forceful withdrawal of power from the incumbent. This was the situation in Nigeria between the 1960s and 1990s just as it is the situation now in some parts of Africa like Central African Republic, Mali, etc. Especially in the scene where young secondary school students protest against the military dictatorship of their leader, Mombasa, the film uses the scene to depict the heartlessness of military regimes in Africa while showcasing the repugnance of students against political violence. Here, there is the realisation of dystopia in the film where Mombasa commands the students to be shot and killed. Thus, with the iconography of littered corpses on screen in this scene, one recalls the actuality of the massacre of school children in South

Africa during the apartheid years captured also in the film *Cry Freedom* (Attenborough, 1987) to consider parallelisms between films and the African society.

In the *King of Crude* (Ugezu, 2010), another similitude of violent reality is dramatised where traditional rulers in conjunction with political leaders confiscate and sell other people's lands because of oil deposits in them without compensation to the original owners. Starring Sam Dede (Tamuno), Ken Erics (Timi), Olu Jacobs (King), Jim lyke (Prince), Gentle Jack (Tombo) and others, the film portrays a crude representation of violent disfranchisement of a people by their ruler while presenting viewers with the visual iconography of a people's gut-wrenching anguish at the bizarre emptiness of corrupt leadership practices not only in the film but also in Nigeria. The crisis in the film occurs at the level of clashes between the king's (Olu Jacob) family and that of Tamuno (Sam Dede), whose father, the king killed and usurped his land for personal gains.

In its 75-minute sequel, *Crude War* (Ugezu, 2010), the context of this battle is extensively dramatised between the youths of the village in line with Tamuno and the king's family. Here, the use of fire arms by the police in support of the king's wish is reminiscent of the cruelty of violence perpetrated against innocent victims by some Nigerian police members who disregard the rule of law at the offer of money. There are issues of kidnapping, gun-shooting, looting and fights here that characterise the storyline as depicting violence in the society against the unemployed and some voiceless families, especially in the oil rich Niger Delta of Nigeria. For instance, the actuality of the violent execution of Ken Saro Wiwa of Ogoni land in November 1995 and his companions and the brazen massacre of some indigenes of Odi, in the oil rich Bayelsa

state of Nigeria in November 1999 by government officials are iconic underpinnings of these representations in the Nigerian context.

Fuel Subsidy (Okeke, 2012) is one other film that represents oil related violence in Nigeria both as a commentary and as a representation of what happened in January 2012 when the federal government of Nigeria allegedly removed the grant it used to give to oil workers to cushion the effects of oil needs in the country. This film, directed by Okeke Chukwu juxtaposes the high handedness of the government with the spectacle of violent hardships in the country at the time framed around such themes as the high cost of food stuffs, lack of transportation for daily activities, soaring level of unemployment, hunger and abject poverty of individuals. Not only did Nigerians go on rampage against this violent scenario in 2012, most people also called for a return to the *status quo* against such economic violence(s) in the polity.

The issue of rape in the society which underpins another brand of violence in the society is also captured in films like *Onyebuchim* (Onyeka, 2010) and *Act of Faith* (Aniekwe, 2008). Particularly *Onyebuchim*, a 122-minutes movie, shot in Igbo language with subtitles in English dramatises the pains and sorrows of individuals branded outcasts in the Igbo society of Nigeria for no just reason except that their ancestors must have been consecrated to the gods and village deities at sometime in history. Especially in the Igbo society of Nigeria, this caste system is traditionally referred to as 'outcasts.' Onwubiko describes it as a 'particular group of people, who have been stigmatized from time immemorial as social outcasts to the point of dehumanization' (1993, p.25). Here, the film uses the story of Onyebuchi, a girl from this group of people

to interrogate the society on the violent issue of alienation, dehumanization and forceful rape.

Being considered ostracised as an *osu* girl without the rights and privileges of other free-born citizens of the society, Onyebuchi reclines to herself and does not mingle with others. But rather than let her be, one of the sons of the village is constantly sneaking in to her hut at nights and sleeping with her forcefully which is an abomination in the land since such acts ought automatically to make him become also an *osu*. But rather than pursue the truth of stopping the rape violence on Onyebuchi, the village elders led by the boy's father, Ichie Obidi misleads judgment by arguing that victims of the *osu* caste system have no right to judgment in the king's palace, not to talk of facing the freeborn citizens of the land to argue their innocence or not. Like Onyebuchi in this film that suffers marginalisation and gender discrimination as violent injustices, Pastor Uche (Mercy Johnson) who is the victim of rape in *Act of Faith* suffers also the disillusionment of violence that represents what goes on in the Nigerian society. Reporting her condition to her mother who discovers she is pregnant from the rape by hoodlums that waylaid their house at night, she cries out her pains to her mother and viewers alike, thus:

It is not fun for me mama. I feel so much pain, deep in my heart. I swallow my saliva. I feel so much agony. I dream horror. I wake up feeling gloomy everyday on earth. I eat my tears, mama. I eat these tears because I see nothing but pity. I see the shadow of myself begging God to help me and vindicate me, mama.

The theme of violence is one major area that most African and Nollywood films thrive. This is not because they are preachy or over-laden with religious symbols but because they use the

everydayness of people's living circumstances to interrogate and moralise the society. In other words, the parallelisms between filmic storylines and the society as seen by the readings of films in this article is ideologically to summon people to a rethink on the functionality of the society for the common good.

Conclusion

Even though this article started off theorising the root paradigm of violence in the society, suffice to say that the sophisticated nature of belligerent atrocities as earlier marshalled out here is becoming terribly enigmatic to define or theorise. Thus, delineating its forms and parameters is one area that filmic representations offer mankind the fulfilment of such media function like being the mirror of the society by visually re-creating the illusions of realities both for pleasurable consumptions and as a matter of offering viewers some epistemic interrogations on their existential circumstances. Particularly in Nigeria, the notion of violence as perceived from the media, especially in films, is couched in dark themes to underpin the conviction that its wind blows no person any good and by so doing moralise the society on the urgency of changing the *status quo* against all odds. Thus, by the nature of parallelisms between films and the society, the dystopia of violence(s) seen in the films can be argued as challenging humankind to a rethink on the everyday living styles in Africa and Nigeria in particular, in order to address people's existential circumstances. To do this is to consider everybody and every life as important as the other and from that standpoint cease to hurt others.

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