

**THE NIGERIAN FILM INDUSTRY AND  
LITERARY ADAPTATION: THE JOURNEY OF  
THINGS FALL APART FROM PAGE TO SCREEN**

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**Abstract**

Adaptation is a vital aspect of literary development and dissemination. Between the genres of literature, and among the media, adaptation has been a source of cross breeding. In the global film Industry, adaptation serves the purpose of visual translation. Film adaptation is not new as it has been in existence from the inception of the film medium. In adapting Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart to film, although the filmmaker deviates as little as possible from the novel, making only minor changes in plot, these plot changes are significant and go a long way to enhance the story and bring visual variety to the audience. It then means that film transforms all subjects and objects into new signs which communicate to the audience. In essence, film is rooted in the communication and promotion of ideas, and ideas serve as a veritable instrument of enlightenment and education.

**Introduction**

Art exists in many forms, of which literature and film are but two. Literature is a linguistic art; a creative art produced through the skilful use of words by an author. Film is both a creative and a performance art. It is the product of many people working as a team, in which the skills of each are important in arriving at the final product - the film for distribution to the public. As an art form, literature has been in existence for thousands of years. Film on the other hand, is a relatively young art form. However, it has become a viable medium of communication.

Between the genres of literature, and among the media, adaptation has been a source of cross breeding. Literary adaptation is seen by the free web encyclopedia, Wikipedia as "the adapting of literary source to another genre or medium." This means that a work could be adapted from one literary genre to another - say from prose to drama and vice versa. A work can also be adapted from one medium to another - say from literature to film. This is what Wikipedia refers to as film adaptation: "the transfer of a written work to a feature film." This informs the definition of film adaptation as a "movie ... that is based on something else that has already been written, such as a novel or a stage play" (Lynne & Ward, 253). For the purposes of this work, adaptation is taken to mean making suitable already written works, for new surroundings or audiences, or for new media.

**Why Adapt?**

Why do creative artists find other people's works appealing? According to Yerima (120), "The simple answer here is 'choice' and the reasons for it are not far-fetched". He further explains: "Choice in adaptation can be seen as the interest or 'likeness' or

even 'fondness' for an older...work". The immediacy of the themes of an old work, the totality of achievements of such a work, the need to update such a work, and the relationship between the older artist and the adapting artist are some of the factors that can influence this choice.

Extending our inquiry to the reasons for film adaptation, Wikipedia inadvertently presents the reasons for adaptation from page to screen thus, "an adapted work is more bankable, it represents considerably less risk to investors and poses the possibilities of huge financial gains." Such a literary work would have already attracted a following as it is likely to appeal to a broad group of people. Also, the titles of such works, their authors and/or characters may be franchises in and of themselves. Many film companies have been known to take advantage of this.

### **Adaptation In The Global Film Industry**

Adaptation is vital to the growth and development of the global film industry. Anyanwu and Ibagere (221) posit that:

By implication, the relationship between literature and film, one can say, is cordial. This is because, too often, literature in any of its genres makes the transition onto the screen and the screen also transits into genres of literature, especially into drama and the novel.

As a matter of fact, film adaptation is not a new thing. It has been in existence from the inception of the film industry. A few years after the Lumière brothers produced a one-shot film of simple records of actual events, it became obvious that the motion picture had great potential as a medium of story telling. Hence, the urge

to turn to other areas for subjects (BFI screenonline). As early as 1899, there was an attempt by biographers at adapting Shakespeare's King John. In that attempt, the essence was not to develop a continuous narrative; rather, unconnected scenes were loosely strung together. Yet, "the pleasure for the audience lay in witnessing a favourite scene from a popular work 'brought to life'" (BFI screenonline).

Shakespeare is just one writer whose works have inspired several films. Many other notable writers have had their works adapted from the literary medium into film. These include Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, George Orwell, Rudyard Kipling, D. H. Lawrence and more recently, J. K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame.

### **Nollywood and Adaptation**

In spite of the success Nigerian literature has had over the years, Nollywood has till date maintained a respectable distance from it; very few works of literature are made into films.

Ajeluorou (60)

While pointing out that about eight films adapted from literary works made significant impact at the 2009 Oscar Awards, Ajeluorou asks: "Why has Nollywood not embraced this format in order to tap into the huge audience Nigerian literature enjoys?" This situation, says Ajeluorou, has been so disturbing that "The Committee for Relevant Art (CORA) organised a dialogue on the subject..." Some of the reasons most film practitioners in Nigerian give for this situation can be deduced from Ajeluorou's work.

The greatest problem is that the evolutionary trend of Nollywood from a market rather than a literary or dramatic viewpoint has made the industry grow along purely commercial lines. Nollywood film producers tend to see film simply as a commodity to be sold and bought and not as a creative endeavour. Their main interest is in fact to back productions that will engender as much turnover and box office returns as possible, to the detriment of shelf life. Another problem is the apathy shown Nollywood by notable literary personalities. Says Lancelot Imasuen, a Nollywood director,

...the apathy that has been shown Nollywood from day one has been very unfortunate... apathy from a certain literary clique that never saw anything good in Nollywood. The icons (literary)... have always been very selfish about letting go and absorbing new things, and Nollywood is a new thing (as cited in Ajeluorou, 60).

Before the advent of Nollywood, attempts at adapting literary works into film in Nigeria dates back to the production of Kongi's Harvest (Davis, 1978), believed to be Nigeria's first independent feature film (Balogun, 56; Ekwuazi, 120; Anyanwu and Ibagere, 222). Such other films as Culture in Transition (1963), Bullfrog in the Sun, Things Fall Apart (1987), Akpakaland (2006), etc. were also adapted from literary works.

In any case, Nigerian literature has made a global impact that Nollywood cannot ignore forever. Such classic Nigerian writers as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Isidore Okpewho, J.P. Clark, Ben Okri, Femi Osofisan, Esiaba Irobi and Chimamanda Adichie are too powerful to be ignored.

### ***Things Fall Apart: The Novel***

The novel Things Fall Apart needs no introduction. Written by Chinua Achebe and published in 1958, it is an archetypal modern African novel written in English. It is read and studied throughout Africa and in many English speaking countries, and has received global critical acclaim. The novel depicts Igbo society in the early years of contact with the white man. Ndi Igbo are here presented as a people with great institutions, traditions and laws that emphasise justice, fairness and hard work. They are portrayed as a people who believe in the supremacy of God. The novel may therefore be seen as an attempt at repairing some of the damage done to Ndi Igbo in particular and Africans in general by European depictions. It has been translated into many native languages including a 'late comer' 2008 translation into Igbo by Nwankwo Izuu under the title *Ihe Aghasaa*.

Things Fall Apart explores the tragedy of a man torn apart by internal and external conflicts. Okonkwo's internal conflict is based on anger against a fate that gives him an inauspicious beginning, an anger that also serves as an antidote to his fear of being perceived as weak and ineffectual like his father, Unoka. On the other hand, Okonkwo is in an external conflict with the white man, who has disrupted his world and brought about unacceptable changes with a new government and a new religion. The tragedy lies in the fact that Okonkwo is unable to reach a resolution, and so commits suicide upon finding himself standing alone in a clan that refuses to fight alongside him.

In a larger sense, the novel is about a people that lose their unity under the tensions between the old ways of their traditional society and the new ways brought by the white man. The breaking apart of the clan is embodied in the breaking apart of Okonkwo,

the main protagonist. According to Higo in the Introduction to the novel, Okonkwo is "the hero who fails to hold or uphold the shared responses of his clan, as a result of which the clan, like him breaks apart" (p. v).

The story in this novel is in three parts. Part One shows Okonkwo as a highly successful individual, with his titles, his three wives and eight children in his large compound. We note his full yam barn, and his prowess as a warrior and wrestler. "Although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. ... As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders" (p. 6). It is because of the great respect in which he is held that he is chosen as the emissary of war to Mbaino and asked to take custody of Ikemefuna on behalf of the clan.

However, we also see the darker side of this character, and realise that his main motive for any action is an overwhelming fear - of failure, of being thought weak, of being seen to resemble his peace loving and ineffectual father, Unoka, whom we are told in the novel, lived "a contemptible life" and died "a shameful death" (p. 13). Not wanting to be like his father, Okonkwo hates gentleness, a quality valued by his father. Dominated by this fear and the irrational anger it engenders, Okonkwo "rules his household with a heavy hand" (p. 9), dealing violently with his wives and children and nearly murdering his wife, Ekwefi, for a tactless remark. When the clan, at the decree of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, decide to kill Ikemefuna, it is Okonkwo who, dazed with fear of being thought weak, strikes the killing blow in spite of the fact that he has been in a father-son relationship with the boy for three years.

Part Two shows Okonkwo in exile at his maternal home Mbanta as a result of having committed a female *óchù*, by accidentally killing Ezeudu's son at the funeral of his father. He is able to achieve a measure of success at Mbanta in the mandatory seven years he spends there, but he never loses his desire to return to his homeland, Umuofia.

In Part Three, Okonkwo is back in Umuofia, which he finds changed in ways he finds impossible to accept. The white man's government and religion have significantly impacted on the community, and Okonkwo finds he is unable to rouse his people to action against them. Finally, he acts on his own - he decapitates a court messenger, thereby arousing the ire of the colonial government. In his extremity, he commits suicide.

### **Things Fall Apart: The Film**

The film version of *Things Fall Apart* came out in 1987. It was directed by David Orere. The film, "which was shot on celluloid and transferred to tapes for the traditional small screen of the television for Nigerian viewers" (Ogunsuyi, 52), is in thirteen (13) episodes of thirty minutes each. The film features Pete Edochie in the lead role of Okonkwo.

### **Things Fall Apart: Journey From Page To Screen**

According to Welsh and Morawski (32), each film adaptation "is necessarily an interpretation of the original (novel), with the (novelist's) language and themes filtered through the mind and imagination of the film director and his team of collaborators". As a result, an adapted film is coloured by the director's "background, education, prejudices, artistic taste ..." In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, the director's treatment seems to be based on a desire to

highlight or showcase Igbo traditional culture.

*Things Fall Apart* is filmed on location in a setting of the same time and place as the novel. The film is done in a combination of the theatrical and realistic modes of filming. The director's choice of these two modes has two advantages. First, it enables him to stay as faithful as possible to the novel. It also enables him to represent many aspects of traditional Igbo culture, including the architecture, agricultural methods, daily lifestyle, various ceremonies, festivals, and the music and dances that accompany them. However, the disadvantages of this choice are detrimental to the film. For instance, there is a tendency towards too much detail. In the war scenes for example, the viewer must follow the Umuofia warriors all the way from their village and through the tall grass to meet the opposing party. Furthermore, every dance is performed from beginning to end and every song rendered likewise, thereby creating mere spectacle. The final effect of all these protracted scenes is monotony. In addition to the above, some scenes look more like stage work than camera work. The scene in which children's spirits torment Okonkwo is a case in point.

Although the filmmaker deviates as little as possible from the novel, making only minor changes in plot, these plot changes are significant. For instance, the film's dramatic and action-filled scene of the announcement of Ogbuefi Udo's wife is more striking than the same incident in the novel, in which the murder is announced at a meeting that takes place in response to the town crier's ogene the previous night. Action and excitement are also central to the wrestling scene in which Okonkwo defeats Amalinze the Cat. While the novel tells the story of this match in vivid language, it is nevertheless not part of the plot. A notable deviation from the novel is in the film's portrayal of the character Unoka,

Okonkwo's father, who is shown as being instrumental to Okonkwo's victory over Amalinze the Cat.

However, the film as an end product is more a presentation than an adaptation in that its plot follows a linear progression. This has the effect of minimising the major differentiating feature between the page and the screen; namely, that whereas a novel relies on skilful language use to create pictures for the reader, a film relies more on skilful camera work to do the same. Hence, one expects the camera to tell the story in *Things Fall Apart*. However, a critical reading of this film reveals many weak points in the making of the film. These weak points are occasioned by the poor application of the language of film. Anyanwu and Ibagere (225) state, "The language of the screen revolves around the composition of shots, camera angles, camera movement, modes of transition, points of view, etc..." Put differently, "What conveys the message of film is a fusion of the fundamental visual elements of camera placement, blocking, lighting and scene length, and not plot line" (Ihentuge, 13).

The camera work in the film *Things Fall Apart* is faulty. There are countless cases of static camera positioning. According to Shaka (45), "When static camera positions are adopted at the level of scenic representation, narrative action seems to drag." This would explain why the film *Things Fall Apart* is about 6 hours and 30 minutes long.

In addition to the above, there are severe oversights in the editing of the film. As Owuamalam (213) states, editing "uses a cohesive and logical sequence to achieve a believable composition that can be acceptable as credible in content". There are at least two shots that detract from the credibility of this film. For instance, in the war scene, one of the extras reveals a pair of modern blue

and white striped shorts that are obviously incongruous with the costumes in this film. That part of the action should have been cut. Also, there is no reason why the viewer should be shown that the Christian church is merely a façade and not a solid structure in the scene where the church is being destroyed by the villagers and their masquerades.

The application of special effects in the film is perfunctory. This brings a measure of awkwardness and artificiality into many scenes. Such scenes as the wrestling between Okonkwo and Amalinze, the war between Umuofia and Mbaino, the beating of Ekwefi by Okonkwo and the attempt to shoot her, the killing of Ikemefuna, the accidental shooting of Ezeudu's son during the burial of his father, the destruction of the church and several other scenes are found wanting of the necessary effects. A reader of the novel would probably enjoy the novelist's narration of these scenes more than a viewer of the film version. The transitional effects are also faulty, and the lighting poorly executed, with the result that many scenes are played in the dark.

Another aspect of the film worth noting is the area of graphics. Davis (15) supplies useful hints about the handling of graphics which the passage of time has not invalidated. He admonishes:

In superimposing a caption on a background picture, make sure that the lettering and the background are of contrasting tones. When working in colour it is also necessary to make sure that lettering and background will have contrast in monochrome reception...use light letters on a dark background and dark letters on a light background, otherwise they will disappear....

The film *Things Fall Apart* does not adhere to Davis' position above in the way captions and end credits are imposed on background pictures in its thirteen (13) episodes. Consequently, information contained in those captions and credits are lost to the viewer.

In dramatic performance, whether on stage or screen, the term costume includes all the garments and accessories worn by the characters, the hairdos and everything associated with face and body make-up, including masks (Barranger, 247; Wilson, 305). Thus, costume and make-up are closely related. According to Corrigan and White (77), "Costumes are the clothing and related accessories that a character wears or that defines that character and contributes to the visual impression and design of the film overall", while make-up refers to "cosmetics... applied to the actor's face or body (to) highlight or even disguise or distort certain aspects of the face or body". They go on to state that costume and make-up have three functions in film: to support scenic realism, highlight character and act as narrative markers.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the costumes are often flamboyant and colourful. These costumes are rather idealised. That is to say that they are not a true representation of the clothes worn at that point in the history of Ndi Igbo. Photographs from Basden (1982) show the clothing in early colonial times to be less rich and colourful, and less elaborate than is shown in the film. This is understandable however, as the film seems to have as one of its main aims the promotion and revival of Igbo culture. It therefore seeks to portray that culture in the best possible light while remaining realistic enough to conform to the historical setting. Consequently, it does away with bare breasts in its portrayal of the female characters and nakedness in the portrayal of children. Whether this has a positive or negative effect in terms of accuracy and authenticity is

debatable. In any case, Aig-Imoukhuede (89) points out that "there are records of the use, right up to the 40s, of bark cloth and raffia-fibre as clothing". Other items of traditional clothing he mentions, such as loin-cloths, beads and caps are much in evidence as part of costume in this film.

Costume also establishes status in the film. First of all, the costumes of the people of Umuofia is richer than those of other communities such as Mbanta. In particular, the costumes of the Ndichie of Umuofia, who are portrayed as the elite of Umu Igbo are in bright shades of red, blue, purple and gold. The costumes of the members of other communities are, by contrast, not as rich or colourful. Likewise, the costumes of the women, young men and children are paler, tending towards white and cream, relieved only by darker stripes. Many of these costumes are constructed from locally woven Igbo fabrics such as Akwete, Popo and Akwa Mmiri, while others are made with George, an imported textile material which is nevertheless closely associated with traditional Igbo attire. Another contrast in costume is between the converts and the 'heathens'. The female converts are costumed in a motley collection of wrappers, blouses and headcloths and the males in ill-fitting shorts, singlets and shirts. The costumes of the 'heathens' on the other hand, are more dignified and becoming.

In general, costume in *Things Fall Apart* may be considered successful, except in the scene of Okonkwo's torment by the spirits of young children. This costume does not show the professionalism of the others. Rather, it looks like costume from an amateur stage production.

Make-up in *Things Fall Apart* is quite basic, and its main function is in creating character traits, such as age, which is signified by skilfully adding grey to the hair. Make-up also functions in

this film as an indicator of the passage of time; that is, as a narrative marker, as in the case of Okonkwo's wives who show signs of aging after their seven years in exile by their whitened hair and lined faces. Body decoration using uli (uri) and nzu is also in evidence in *Things Fall Apart*. However, there is no sign of ichi (scarification), which was a popular practice among Igbo men during the historical period in which the film is set.

Film music may be diegetic or non-diegetic. Diegetic music is part of the narrative of a film (Corrigan and White, 547). For this reason, Oppenheim, (webpage) describes it as

'source music', which is music that plays a key part in a scene of a film, usually being physically inserted into a scene, making the characters of the scene aware of it. The music can be heard or played by one of the characters.

*Things Fall Apart* contains a wealth of diegetic music in the form of various types of Igbo cultural music which are performed by the musicians as part of the many festivals, ceremonies and feasts that take place in the film. Apart from these, there are also the hymns and Christian choruses of the converts, which are sung by members of the cast. Finally, Ikemefuna's mother's lament shows off Nellie Uchendu's musical skills. Her minor part in this film is considerably enhanced by her singing. While all this music serves to showcase Igbo culture, the sheer quantity of it is unusual considering that *Things Fall Apart* is not a musical. Furthermore, there is some confusion in the film concerning what is diegetic or non-diegetic music. For instance, in the scene of the feast celebrating Okonkwo's return to Umuofia from Mbanta, there is a group of women singing and dancing. This music is an important part of

that scene, but it is treated as a cue; that is "a piece of music composed for a particular place in a film" (Corrigan and White, 205). The music stops abruptly as the dialogue starts, and then starts again at the end of the dialogue. While it is true that music is subordinate to dialogue in that scene, the transition from music to dialogue and back could have been smoother.

Non-diegetic music, on the other hand, is film music that is outside the world created in the film. The characters cannot hear it and do not take part in it. Non-diegetic music includes the title score, character themes and music used to underscore or parallel the action in a film. The title score of *Things Fall Apart* consists of a composition built around the two lines from W. B. Yeats' poem from which the novel's title is taken. The song is in English, and is accompanied by Western instruments. This choice of theme music seems inconsistent with the emphasis of the film on traditional Igbo culture. In fact, it creates a certain absurdity. It would have been more appropriate to have used the correct language; that is, Igbo, and to have based instrumental accompaniment on the traditional musical instruments; for as Oppenheim (Webpage) states, "A function of scoring which provides a touch of realism for the action on the screen is the score's identification of the ethnicity, location, and period of the situation or characters on the screen." Kolker (122), on his own part declares, "Music remains an important part of a film's narrative flow, part of its emotional dynamic and, in clever hands, an integral part of the film's structure." This underscoring and paralleling function of film music is often lacking in *Things Fall Apart*.

According to Kolker (12), "Language is clearly cultural and not natural." In his view, language consists of words, which are in themselves "made-up sounds, developed throughout the life of a

culture ... put together in a contrived grammar that everyone in a culture uses to communicate through a decision that particular words will refer to particular things". Thus, language rests on culture. The language of *Things Fall Apart*, the novel and the film, is deeply rooted in traditional Igbo culture, which according to Obiechina (27), "embodied its values and attitudes in its proverbs and fossilised sayings" among other things. Even though the language used is English, this variety of English is essentially Igbo in its structure, background and nuances. Words in the film are as well coated in palm oil as in the novel, for the filmmaker adheres closely to the novel in language use as in almost everything else. The cast of the film is made up of notable actors from different parts of Nigeria, and so there are a variety of accents of Nigerian English. Some viewers may feel that these non-Igbo accents of English detract from the authenticity of the film; but even if these accents, being Nigerian, do not, it is certain that the American accent of one of the missionaries strikes an incongruous note. After all, it is a historical fact that the area was colonised by the British and not the Americans. Another awkward note in the film is in Okonkwo's soliloquy near the end, when he is ostensibly trying to justify his decisions and the actions that arise from them. Barranger (175) defines soliloquy as "a means of taking the audience into the character's head to hear its contents and arguments with the self". This scene appears artificial because the arguments expressed obviously do not emanate from the character Okonkwo, but from the modern man who wrote the script.

### **Conclusion**

In his discussion of the emergence of the video film industry in Nigeria, Shaka (16) states as follows:

Technically speaking, most of the video films of the late 1980s and early 1990s were of poor production quality. Most were hastily shot with VHS cameras which resulted in extreme depreciation and poor picture quality after editing. Besides, the camera and lighting crews were mostly amateurs with little knowledge of camera operation and lighting for the screen...the productions were extremely stogy, with the camera functioning purely as a photographic equipment, offering a peeping window onto the narrative world of the video films. The foregoing factors coupled with limited production budgets resulted in poorly shot and edited video films...., Luckily for the producers of the video films, the hunger of Nigerians for self representation on screen ensured public patronage.

This work has been cited at such length for the singular reason that it contains most of the flaws of the film *Things Fall Apart*. These flaws could be rightly attributed to the stage of film production in Nigeria at the time of its production - the late 1980s. Now that there is a viable video film industry in Nigeria (one that is world acclaimed), this paper suggests that another adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* is due. No rule limits a literary work to only one adaptation. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, has seen three adaptations: in 1920, 1970 and 1992 (BFI screenonline).

Any filmmaker who wishes to take up this suggestion should bear in mind that fidelity in adaptation is to the spirit, and not to the letter, neither is it to structure nor to dialogue. These are matters

of technique, and technique depends on medium. Yerima (125) admonishes that "skill and accurate measurement of what to discard or include in order to achieve a good adaptation" is required. When these factors are taken into account and the adaptation inventively executed - "when the technical details of perspective, focus, and emphasis are handled with skill" - it will then be possible for such a work "to offer what is at once an aesthetic and educational experience" (Berman, ix). As Chinua Achebe declares in an interview with Jerome Brooks of *The Paris Review* (2011):

I believe in the complexity of the human story and that there's no way you can tell that story in one way and say, this is it. Always there will be someone who can tell it differently depending on where they are standing; the same person telling the story will tell it differently. I think of that masquerade in Igbo festivals that dances in the public arena. The Igbo people say, If you want to see it well, you must not stand in one place. The masquerade is moving through this big arena, dancing! If you're rooted to a spot, you miss a lot of the grace. So you keep moving, and this is the way I think the world's stories should be told-from many different perspectives.

It is an indisputable fact that Nigerian filmmakers have maintained a distance from passionate works from the literary milieu. This of course, has benefited neither the film industry nor the literary world. This paper believes that the time is ripe to turn to this area in order to attempt to put a stop to the recycling

syndrome in Nollywood, which has made the industry appear to be suffering from a dearth of new ideas, new subject-matter and new themes for filmmaking.

The cast and crew of *Things Fall Apart* (1987) should be commended for that production; it was a tonic in the viewing experience of Nigerians at the time of its production given the technical, artistic and financial challenges of filmmaking at that time. The history of film in Nigeria will always remember and be proud of this epoch making production.

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