

THE INVASION 1897 AGENDA IN THE BENIN LANGUAGE
FILM SEGMENT OF NOLLYWOOD

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Introduction

Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen (LOI) has always insisted that his *Invasion 1897*¹ (2014) like his *Adesuwa* (2012), among many others, are Nigerian films (Nollywood films), not just Benin² language films because in his specific words, "we are still experimenting..."³ This claim raises a number of issues in view of what the Benin video-film is vis-à-vis what can be considered the Nigerian video-film. It also creates the need to seek and make some clarifications on what really constitutes the Benin video-film; as a video-film shot in Benin or Edo language, or one that concerns the ways of life of the Benin people, or one shot on Benin soil or in some diasporic Benin community. It is likely because of some of the issues arising from LOI's remark that made Osakue Omoera to theoretically situate *Ebuwa* (2009), *Adesuwa* (2012), *Invasion 1897* (2014), among others, as Benin language video-films because they draw from the rich repertory of Benin history, imagery, music, dance, language and so on, especially as they pertain to the Benin Oba who embodies the customs and traditions of the Benin race (2014).

The Benin video-film is a film produced from the Benin people's perspective. It derives from the Benin worldview as well as the contemporary experiences of the Benin-speaking people. In fact, it has been empirically and theoretically established that the Benin video-film enjoys an enviable status among indigenous Nigerian film cultures as a result of its cultural value to the Benins and its wide acceptance by the Benin-speaking audience (Omoera, 2014). In this regard, LOI's tour of cinemas in Nigeria, Americas, and Europe, with his award-winning movies such as *Ebuwa* (2009), *Adesuwa* (2012), *Invasion 1897* (2014), etc., have further opened up the windows of Benin video-films to the wider world, just as the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo film cultures have attained.

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Other dynamic Benin film practitioners such as Sylvester Uwadiae, Jolly Amadasun, Wilson Ehigiator, Onions Edionwe, Monday Osagie, Eunice Omoregie-Osayande, Omadeli Uwagboe, among others, have produced and are still producing fascinating movies in different production sites in Benin City and environs. The worth of this bustling socio-economic continuum of creative/productive activities in the Benin area and elsewhere in Nigeria represent a sphere of critical possibilities in the country's quest for sustainable national development (Omoera, 2015). Indeed, the filmic activities of Benin cineastes, particularly LOI, have made possible, some kind of rapprochements among the Benin people as well as other peoples in Nigeria and the world over. These cultural experiences have steadily ensured the development and sustenance of Benin in the face of huge socio-political and socio-economic challenges, which have been spawned by contemporary global confrontations.

Regardless of the fact that LOI objects very doggedly to the idea of calling Ebuwa (2009), Adesuwa (2012), *Invasion 1897* (2014), etc., Benin video-films, some interesting dimensions in the dynamics of historicizing the relationship between the Benin people, their language, their objets d'art and objets trouvés, as well as the nascent use of Nollywood films as advocacy tools in the call for reparations and 'righting' the wrongs of western powers in Africa, including the activities of Britain in Benin Kingdom, with particular reference to the film, *Invasion 1897*, are worth highlighting. The film tells of the British invasion of the Benin Kingdom in 1897, the despoliation it occasioned, and how the resilient Benin people waded through that dark era of their collective history. The British incursion into Benin is an actual event that occurred over a hundred years ago. It was a series of underhand dealings, intrigues, diplomatic rows, and economic and military adventurism between the Britons and Benins, which culminated in the assault on the Benin Kingdom and the looting of precious artefacts and other valuables from the palace of the Benin Oba (Omoera, forthcoming).

It is in view of the foregoing that we tried to probe what made Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen (LOI) to make *Invasion 1897* and how his object of interest vitalises the agenda of the Benin language video-film in Nollywood. The interview was conducted in Benin City on July 4, 2015.

Omoera: Good morning, sir. It's a pleasure meeting you again.

LOI: My pleasure, too. Go ahead.

Omoera: Congratulations on the release of your new movie, *Invasion 1897* (2014). How did you start moviemaking as a career?

LOI: I've answered that before. ⁴

Omoera: Can you hazard a guess on the number of films you've made before *Invasion 1897* (2014)?

LOI: I'll also refer you to my website, which is "www.lancelotimasuermovies.com."

Omoera: Some people say that *Invasion 1897* is the most ambitious film project you've ever pursued? Do you agree with them?

LOI: I agree with them totally.

Omoera: If all you've said so far is anything to go by then *Invasion 1897* (2014) is a mega-budget movie in the annals of Nollywood?

LOI: O! Yes. At any rate, thank you.

Omoera: With many local and international awards as a producer and director of Benin language films and English Nollywood films, how were you able to blend these consciousness into the management of casts and crew of *Invasion 1897* (2014)?

LOI: Clearly from the beginning we knew what we wanted to achieve, get major casts and crew from all over the world... I brought my D.O.P. and sound man from India; I'd casts from about fourteen different countries, and then I went to London to finalise with several others. In fact, people from over thirty countries participated in *Invasion 1897* and managing them weren't a piece of cake but we were conscious of what we wanted to achieve. We all worked hard for it. We were ready psychologically, mentally, spiritually and God helped us through and we were able to put all that together. Before *Invasion 1897*, I've had the opportunity of shooting in Ghana, Holland, Germany, and South Africa severally and, of course, I've shot in the big one, Hollywood. So, with all those international experiences I was able to direct and give the right directions to what I wanted to achieve in *Invasion 1897*.

Omoera: What is your aim of doing this?

LOI: This very popular global story connects us, the Benin people, to other parts of the world. I wanted to let the world hear our own side of the story. It was important they hear our own side of the story.

Omoera: In specific terms, *Invasion 1897* is the Oba Ovoramen's story. What inspired you to rewrite this clichéd history using motion pictures?

LOI: I said that before. I've reasoned the significance in the calculation of the Nigeria story today. I can boldly say that if Benin did not probably fall in 1897, there would probably not have been a country called Nigeria. I'm not sure if the British were not able to defeat the Benin Kingdom, I'm not sure if it would've been possible for them to amalgamate the southern and northern protectorates of Nigeria and put them together and call it one name. If there was a middle force that couldn't follow their whims and caprices the centre would've held for them. Ironically, the significance of this place called Benin hasn't been projected enough in the general picture of this entity called Nigeria. Hence, I needed to 'drop' this story. Unfortunately, it hasn't got to where it ought to be because the authorities here didn't quite understand what we were trying to do. The power of motion pictures, they don't have an idea, they don't understand.... The needed supports, the needed propaganda, and the needed excitement, have not been sufficiently given to this work. We are hoping some persons will understand when the time comes.

Omoera: Is this similar to what you did with the Adesuwa story in your chartbuster Benin movie, *Adesuwa* (2012)?

LOI: Well, let me correct that. *Adesuwa*, *Invasion 1897* are not Benin movies. I feel it's belittling the film to narrow such a gargantuan production to say a Benin film. It's not a Benin film but it's back-grounded in Benin like a lot of other chartbuster films. You see that they are all always back-grounded; we just used the Benin culture to tell the story, because the story connects to the Benin people. The language spoken in the film is English and the background and culture is Benin. So, it's 'wrong' to say it's a Benin film. It is an English Nollywood film which is back-grounded in Benin (Edo) culture.

Omoera: Thank you for your interesting explanation, but I'm sure your claims would generate serious arguments in some other fora. At any rate, could you let's into some of the challenges you encountered in the making of *Invasion 1897*?

- LOI: Finance.... We didn't get it the way we planned and most people couldn't just understand because it was the first time they were being in such a big set. They couldn't just understand the picture and vision of what I wanted to see. So, in a sense, finance was really a problem on its own.
- Omoera: Can you put a finger on the cost of producing this movie?
- LOI: I've never even thought about that. It was a big budget film.
- Omoera: Many Nollywood producers and enthusiasts believe it is not possible to have a mega film production such as the one you just mentioned, what is your view about this?
- LOI: Well, I wouldn't say it's not possible. Anything you want to achieve, you can achieve. If I get five billion dollars today for a film production, I know the kind of story I will pick. I will achieve it because there are several stories that have not been told. It's because of financial constraints that we are now limiting ourselves to telling parlour to parlour story; in-law; love story; and all that. So much more is happening. The Biafra story has not been told from the Nigerian perspective. The concretization of this entity called Nigeria, whether it's true or false, has not been told. The Lord Lugard factor, how do they come about naming this place Nigeria? A lot of stories have not been told, how Lord Lugard fell has not been told. What is restraining people from these stories is how do we market it, how do we sell it and where do we even source the money to make such project. So, I think finance is a major thing. Poor structure is also another factor.
- Omoera: The picture quality, sound, cinematography and the general mise en scene in *Invasion 1897* are in a ship-shape and even the British Film Institute (BFI) recently attested to this during a recent screening of the movie in London.
- LOI: Well, again we just wanted to let people know that we've the capacity to do whatever we set our minds on. World class films can emanate from here... If the resources; the structures; encouragement; environment are right, Nigerian films can be on the same pedestal with the best anywhere in the world.
- Omoera: How did you come about the concept?

LOI: The story is out there, I've always wanted to tell the story. I've passion for the Benin man or woman. As a filmmaker, this is one story I was passionate about and one story I wanted to tell and I thank God I've been able to achieve it. I still feel I didn't make *Invasion 1897* the way I wanted it to be but we are happy we got somewhere.

Omoera: Under what genre of film would you want to classify *Invasion 1897*?

LOI: The epic.

Omoera: With well over 400 movies in the filmographic corpus of Benin films, does it bother you that films are hardly made in the documentary format in that segment of Nollywood?

LOI: Well, I think a lot of us weren't trained to actually make documentary films but we just started doing that. We are doing a documentary on some guy who sells apple in Benin City. The tentative name of the movie is the "Benin Apple Seller" or the "Benin Fruit Seller." I'm making a documentary on the Benin moat, and also I've the intention to make a documentary on child-naming ceremony.

Omoera: Did it ever cross your mind while making *Invasion 1897* that you were engaging in a sort of filmic refiguring of memory; a kind of trauma healing, historically speaking, of wounds inflicted on the Benin consciousness over a century ago?

LOI: Well, I just made a Nigerian film not a Benin film as I said earlier and we are still experimenting with that, okay! If a film runs in the cinema anywhere in the world, make one billion dollars in one week, the man or woman who made it would smile to the bank alongside the casts and crew. But I believe too that films can be strong advocacy tools with which certain things that bother us as human beings can be addressed. So, we try to always break limits, reframe some of the things we were told in the light of new facts, with the hope that we can be better persons and the world would be a better place. We've started to experiment....through *Invasion 1897*. Soon I believe we'll get there.

Omoera: Are there other specific issues, with regard to the Benin (Edo) nation you sought to address with this chartbuster Nollywood movie? And do you think you've achieved them?

- LOI: No, there are many issues we've not touched. There is the most popular mass exodus of people from Africa; the question of human capital development, among others, and the myths that surround them. We would love to touch many of these issues if God gives us life.
- Omoera: I'm aware that you've graciously honoured many invites from universities and other training institutions, including the Department of Theatre and Film Arts, University of Port Harcourt, the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, in Nigeria and elsewhere to serve as guest lecturer/guest artiste to mentor, hone the skills and inspire up-coming talents. Are there any specific plans to replicate yourself or the feat you've attained or even surpass it by way of setting up film schools to train and empower more younger generations of videographers, screenwriters, actors and actresses, and other talents in the Benin segment of Nollywood?
- LOI: That's in the pipeline. That's why I do more of lectures, public speaking. I've visited quite a number of universities talking, showing our films and we're hoping that very soon our institute for film and performing arts will be announced and made operational.
- Omoera: By the same token sir, as a guest lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma in the 2013/2014 academic session, you talked about a certain 2:1/2 theory. Can you expound on what this really means in relation to the making of *Invasion 1897* which is probably the most costly mega-budget movie from the Benin film segment of Nollywood in terms of production?
- LOI: I believe that for any actor/actress to successfully 'deliver' a character in a film, certain elements in that character that person has it as an individual that makes it. I feel there is a 25% of him or her in that work and in that character. Then others should be what the artist will give to you, which makes the other 75%. In casting for *Oba Ovoramen*, I try to apply that. I wanted a Benin man that understands the story; that has passion for the story. So, when you actually see the man playing the 'character' of *Oba Ovoramen*, it draws a lot of attention as far performance is concerned. In essence, that is what we are trying to say.

Omoera: Thank you, sir.

LOI: You're welcome.

Notes

1. Invasion 1897 was screened in the New Lecture Theatre (NLT) of Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, on 23rd July, 2015, through the collaborative effort of the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma and Lancewealth Images Nigeria Limited. The movie has made successful runs in cinemas in Benin, Lagos, Ibadan, London, California and elsewhere.
2. Benin (and not Bini) which is interchangeably used with Edo in this work is the language spoken in the southern part of Edo State. It is also used to refer to the people found in this area. According to the Benin Traditional Council - Palace Press Release, Ref. No. BTC.A66/VOL.IV/262 dated 28th August, 2006. "Our attention has been drawn to the practice in which some persons in correspondence to the Palace and publications in the newspapers and magazines refer to Benin as 'Bini'. It is hereby stated for the information of the general public that our correct ethnic name is Benin and not 'Bini', and that our people are to be referred to as Benin people or simply Benins. The Omo N'Oba requests that the use of 'Bini' should stop forthwith. Individuals, government agencies, corporate organizations, print and electronic media, and the general public should please take note". Signed (actual signature) Chief S. O. U Igbe, MCN, Iyase of Benin on behalf of all Benin Chiefs.
3. The same issue was raised by LOI in another interview he granted me in Benin City on July 4, 2015. That interview which is entitled "Imasuen Factor in the Benin Language Film Sector of Nollywood" will appear in a forthcoming publication, *Twenty Years Behind the Nollywood Camera: Reflections on the Films of Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen*, edited by Kwaghkondo Agber and Olympus Ejue.
4. LOI expounded on this matter in "Imasuen Factor in the Benin Language Film Sector of Nollywood" which is part of a forthcoming publication, *Twenty Years Behind the Nollywood Camera: Reflections on the Films of Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen*, edited by Kwaghkondo Agber and Olympus Ejue.

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